



# SEX, SYMBOLISTS AND THE GREEK BODY

RICHARD WARREN

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# Sex, Symbolists and the Greek Body

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Richard Warren

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# Introduction

## Context

In 1912 the French Symbolist artist Odilon Redon (1840–1916) painted his *The Birth of Venus*<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The goddess of love rises from the sea, a beautiful nude, radiantly bright and sensual. A perfect harmony of form and colour, entrancing, overpowering and ineluctable. Redon's Venus is utterly emblematic of the concerns of this book. In it we trace how the Symbolists arrived at such an epiphany. But Venus' is not only a birth. It is a *re-birth*. In Symbolist terms. For she perfectly encapsulates the quest for Greek sculpture reborn: the resurrection of an original Venus, one already born in antiquity and known in countless copies.<sup>3</sup> And in that, its latest rebirth, love, the erotic – it has acquired a whole new level of power, one that is imbued with all the *fin-de-siècle*'s mystery, longing for the unattainable – unease, even.<sup>4</sup>

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed a revolution in European art. Or, more correctly put, a series of revolutions. This book considers one of these: the movement that styled itself 'Symbolism'. Of the many, often mystic, preoccupations of the Symbolists, there is perhaps no single one that emerges so powerfully as the erotic. And, as this book argues, its adherents found that no symbolic language so powerfully expressed sexuality as classical myth and art. In our title, and throughout this book, we refer to the 'Greek body', in recognition of the fact that classical Greek sculpture – though they endlessly reinvented it – was a font of inspiration to the Symbolists. Recast in new media, blended with orientalism or transposed to mystic worlds, the essential erotic inspiration of the classics endured.

This book is about the Symbolist movement in art. Yet the artistic style had its origins in a literary movement. Who were the Symbolists? And what do we mean by Symbolism in art? Given the essentially elusive nature of Symbolism,



**Figure 1** Odilon Redon, *The Birth of Venus*. Courtesy Getty – Peter Willi.

any book on the movement must begin by answering these questions. Why elusive? Firstly, because Symbolist artists intended their art to be so. Symbolism was, as mentioned, primarily a literary movement, from which a series of artists in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – originally in France and Belgium, but before long as far afield as Russia – took inspiration. Both its literary and artistic manifestations may be considered a broad church of intellectual thought, and may best be considered through the personalities that defined them. Perhaps no single figure was as important to Symbolism as the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67). In 1860s France, his revolutionary brand of poetry – above all in his *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) – sent shockwaves through his generation of writers and artists, and the following generation. The power of Baudelaire's imagery, which did not shy away from portraying the deeper, and often darker, sides of human nature, provoked both admiration and contempt. But it was above all the allusive and metaphorical nature of

Baudelaire's poetry which was to exercise its most lasting influence. Taking their cue from Baudelaire, the generation of poets that followed – most seminally the Belgian poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), but also the Frenchmen Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91) and Paul Verlaine (1844–96), and the Belgian Emile Verhaeren<sup>5</sup> (1855–1916) – set a new course away from both the Naturalism and the Realism of Victor Hugo (1802–85) and his followers, and from the studied Neoclassicism of the Parnassian poets. The Symbolists turned their attention away from this world, to focus on another – to a world beyond this world, a world shrouded from sight by the translucence of the material world, but one whose further reality might be dimly made out through the inspiration of poetry. That poetry could no longer simply be descriptive of the visible world. It must instead be a poetry of symbols. As in a dream, by alluding to what could not be directly expressed, those symbols would unlock deeper understanding and mystic insight.

The Symbolists were essentially a group of intellectuals who, while sharing this basic creed, interpreted it in a great variety of individual ways. And while deliberately divorced from reality, they were not divorced from contemporary currents of intellectual and artistic thought in the 1890s, engaging – often vigorously – with their contemporaries where their ideas diverged from their own. A number of figures may be more or less associated with the Symbolists who helped define its social and cultural milieu, and in this sense it is certainly possible to speak of a sort of fluid Symbolist circle. That circle was not always one that saw eye to eye with wider society. As Cassou (1988: 8) characterizes this dynamic:

There was a society within a society; it was a separate little society with its somewhat provocative manners which were bohemian, avant-garde, and only just acceptable. Its members had a very elevated idea of what constituted art and poetry outside a way of life which was firmly rooted in its bourgeois assurance, its order, its financial and industrial power, and the comforts which the unchangingly academic productions of its licensed tradesmen procured for it.

Indeed the French writer, critic and exponent of Symbolism Gustave Kahn (1859–1936) (1902: 22) found in its independence of societal and intellectual fashion one of Symbolism's most important virtues:

Moreover, it must be pronounced, and very loudly, that one of the virtues of the emergent Symbolism was that it did not cave in before literary power, before titles, the open journals, friendships of note, and that it redressed the wrongs of the preceding generation.<sup>6</sup>

For Kahn (1902: 51–2), those wrongs were particularly associated with Naturalism and its perceived cheapening of literature and art:

The union between the symbolists, beyond an undeniable love of art, and a common soft spot for the unknowns of a previous age, was above all founded on a collection of rejections of former habits. Refusing the lyric and Romanesque anecdote, refusing to write according to the latest fashions, under pretext of adapting to the ignorance of the reader, rejecting the closed art of the Parnassians, and Hugo's cult pushed to fetishism, protesting against the banality of the little naturalists, withdrawing from the gossip novel and the overly simplistic text, renouncing minor analysis and rather attempting synthesis, taking account of foreign contributions when it was that of the great Russians or Scandinavians, progressive – such were the shared characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, likely as a result of both this reticence and the inherent eclecticism of their art, the influence of the Symbolists on mainstream art was limited and should not therefore be overstated – where it can be shown that a sort of establishment Naturalism remained preeminent in France during the period under consideration (whose Republican leanings were part of the reason certain Symbolists, for example Redon, rejected it so fiercely) – and there is no intention of doing so here.<sup>8</sup> Many Symbolists were considered to be dandies by their contemporaries, something which, beyond the concerns of their poetry itself, may be explained by their adulation of the French aristocrat and writer Robert de Montesquieu (1855–1921), and his countryman the author Karl Joris Huysmans' (1848–1907) idealization of him in his novel *Against the Grain* (1884; see Huysmans and Howard 2009). Montesquieu, transposed by Huysmans as his novel's protagonist Des Esseintes, deliberately cultivated a sort of extreme intellectual refinement and luxuriance. Huysmans captures this aristocratic Symbolist ideal in the personality of the hero (/anti-hero) of his novel, which is itself a sort of series of digressions chapter by chapter, following Des Esseintes' various obsessions. If these have anything in common, it is that they are all characterized by his desire to obtain a further form of



refinement or experience a novel sensation. These range from everything from experimentation with deeper states of inebriation in the attempt to reach higher levels of inspiration, to more extreme forms of sexual debauchery, to an (ultimately abortive) attempt to gild an unfortunate turtle's shell with jewels! Des Esseintes himself is characterized as a sort of aristocratic recluse, a young yet jaded man, whose senses are already dulled by the various pleasures and experiences he has had. We might speak of the 'decadence' of Huysmans' protagonist. Decadence was itself a term applied somewhat more broadly during the period to reflect that pursuit of new experience and poetic and artistic styles which characterized the age. Many Symbolists were considered 'decadents' by their contemporaries, even if today we might not consider the two terms as exactly interchangeable. Kahn (1902: 33–4) described the distinction as follows:

In 1885, there were decadents and symbolists, many decadents and few symbolists. The word 'decadent' had been pronounced, but not yet that of 'symbolist'; we were speaking of the symbol, we had not created the generic term 'symbolism', and thus decadents and symbolists were something different. The word 'decadent' had been created by journalists, some of whom had, so they said, picked it up as the beggars of Holland had the insulting epithet.<sup>9</sup>

While Des Esseintes summarizes well in his person much of the dislike the Symbolists incurred on the part of their contemporaries, there is a sense in which the author glories in his decadence, his intellectual snobbery, disdain and debauchery. And this captures an essential characteristic of Symbolism as a whole: highly intellectual, turning away from the world and its vulgarity, pursuing mystic inspiration, bucking sexual conventions in the cause of erotic experimentation – and, above all, unapologetic in doing so.

This dynamic also applied to how the Symbolists engaged with the classics. We should be clear upfront by what we mean by the term 'the classics' (and 'classical'). The term may of course mean different things in different contexts, but it is used throughout this book in the sense of the collective literary, artistic and philosophical inheritance of ancient Greek and Roman civilization. Although the term may be found objectionable for its historical generality, it has been preferred in this study in the absence of a more suitable alternative as best reflecting the education and artistic conception of the Symbolists themselves,

who, as previous generations of artists, most often considered the legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity collectively – even if within this they often had pronounced preferences. Huysmans captures the Symbolists' relationship with that legacy well in the fourth chapter of his novel, which is essentially a long (and rather laborious) list of all of the Latin literature that Des Esseintes either loved or hated, as stocked in his library. The general pattern is one of continuously according favour to ancient texts which are the more rare, the more erudite, the less understood, the more mystic and, most often, the more erotic: 'A portion of the shelves which lined the walls of his orange and blue study was devoted exclusively to those Latin works assigned to the generic period of "The Decadence" by those whose minds have absorbed the deplorable teachings of the Sorbonne.'<sup>10</sup> Baudelaire had himself had the (ultimately unrealized) ambition to translate Petronius, a fact that Kahn (1902: 37) later adduced in support of his theory that the decadent writers had a particular penchant for their similarly decadent ancient counterparts.<sup>11</sup> As Cassou (1984: 134) puts it:

Because they had enjoyed, without counting, the pleasures which had brought them riches, because they had exhausted even the rarest sensations, these characters sought refuge in an imaginary period of Latin decadence, and in modern literature which was 'irreparably affected in its arrangement and forced into explaining everything in its decline'. But the refuge showed itself to be a mirror.

There is the sense in which ancient literature is a treasure trove containing all of the essential nature of man, if one only has the understanding of where and how to look within it. The image of a library containing a wealth of ancient lore, locked up in ancient symbols unintelligible save to the intellectually initiated (the enjoyment of whose – often forbidden – pleasures, was consequently their exclusive right), is itself a good metaphor for understanding the Symbolists' outlook. This sort of literary imagery was neither new, nor unique to the Symbolists, whose Naturalist intellectual adversaries also strayed into this territory, of which the hieraticism and mysticism of the French Realist novelist Gustave Flaubert's (1821–80) novel set in ancient Carthage, *Salammbô* (1862), is a prime example.<sup>12</sup> But this understanding of the classics – and the ancient more generally – was central to the allusive, and often dense, metaphor of Symbolist poetry. Classical myth and literature had long been the foundation

of French poetry, something most recently represented by the Parnassians – a poetic movement led by the French poet Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle (1818–94), which sought to revive traditional forms of verse, and which was heavily inspired by classical mythology. But the Symbolists' understanding and transformation of the classics took a novel direction that no earlier poetic or artistic movement had before.

The focus of this book on the erotic is not accidental. The erotic is not the only concern of the Symbolists, but even where it is not – and it often is – it is frequently used as a symbol for expressing an intended mystic insight or understanding. And while blended with other symbolism, frequently of an orientalizing nature, iconography drawn from classical myth and literature enjoys an undoubtable prominence. There is arguably no single metaphor in Symbolist poetry that expresses this dynamic so well as Mallarmé's *The Afternoon of a Faun* (1876). In a pure flight of fantasy, Mallarmé imagines the sexual adventures of a faun, a half-human, half-animal figure drawn from classical mythology, which appeared frequently as an expression of man's sexual nature in classical art and poetry, and which had become a staple of European art since the Renaissance. Turning back to the figure of this creature sporting in an ancient Arcadian setting, Mallarmé's lone faun pursues the sexually alluring nymphs that form part of his mythical world, and is variously frustrated in his attempts to obtain them. As the faun reflects in the poem's opening lines (Mallarmé et al. 2009: 39):

I'd love to make them linger on, those nymphs.  
 So fair,  
 Their frail incarnate, that it flutters in the air  
 drowsy with tousled slumbers.  
 Did I love a dream? (1–3)

Indeed, we might consider the lamentations of Mallarmé's faun as emblematic of the Symbolist sexual condition more generally (Mallarmé et al. 2009: 41, 45):

Let me reflect . . .  
 what if these women you discuss,  
 faun, represent desires of your own fabulous  
 senses! Illusion flows out of the chilly blue  
 eyes of the chaster one, like a fountain in tears:

the other, though, all sighs – do you think she appears  
 in contrast like a day's warm breeze across your fleece?  
 Not at all: through the lazy languishing release  
 stifling with heat the cool dawn's struggles, not a sound  
 of water but my flute's outpourings murmurs round  
 the thicket steeped in music; and the one stir of air  
 my dual pipes are swiftly shedding everywhere  
 and then dispersing in a sonorous arid sleet,  
 is, over the horizon that no ripples pleat,  
 the visible, serene and artificial sigh  
 of inspiration reascending to the sky. (7–22)

...

I love these virgin angers, this untamed delight  
 of nude and sacred burdens slipping away to shun  
 my burning lips that drink in, as a lightning-sheet  
 quivers! the flesh's secret terror, from the feet  
 of the cruel girl to the heart of the timid one  
 simultaneously abandoned by an innocence, damp  
 with foolish tears or fluids of a less grim stamp.  
*'My offence, in my joy at conquering these sly  
 terrors, was that I prised apart the tousled wry  
 kisses the gods had kept so deftly mingled: I  
 no sooner strove to hide this ecstasy of mine  
 within one girl's happy recesses (with a fine  
 fingerhold on the other one – naïve and slight,  
 not blushing in the least – so that her feathery white  
 might be tinged as her sister's passion caught alight),  
 than from my arms, untwined by some vague perishings,  
 this everlastingly ungrateful captive springs  
 free, careless of my still-intoxicated sighs.'* (75–92)

Cassou (1984: 157) writes of how the poet here 'strove to perpetuate the nymphs on whom Pierre Louÿs, however, in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, pronounced the death sentence'. Whatever judgement we make about the continuing role of classical mythology in the poetry and art of Mallarmé's period, it is unquestionable that Mallarmé's poem had a great impact on his literary and artistic contemporaries, being set to music by the composer Claude Debussy (1862–1918) in his *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1894), and later

transposed to opera by Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950) in his *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912).<sup>13</sup> Mallarmé's poem is an excellent summary of the unconscious classical vocabulary of the Symbolists' erotic imagination. We will return in a later chapter to the faun, a key figure in Symbolist erotic transformations of the classics.

The other essential context of Symbolist literature, which greatly affected its transformations of the classics, was its mysticism. No figure is more important here than the French writer and thinker Joséphin Péladan (who came to be known as the Sâr Péladan) (1858–1918). Péladan was a mystic and self-appointed Babylonian priest who, while widely considered to be an eccentric, nonetheless exercised a great influence over Symbolist poets and artists. Norton (2002: 116) summarizes his influence:

[He] adopted the royal Assyrian title 'Sar', assumed the name of the ancient Babylonian king Merodach Baladan, donned fanciful costumes consisting of heavy dark robes and complicated hats, and espoused a promiscuous mélange of notions cobbled together from the occult teachings of Zoroaster, Pythagorus, Orpheus, the Knights Templar, and the Rosicrucians . . . Ever resourceful, Péladan also presided over a succession of art exhibitions during the 1890s – grandiosely dubbed the Salons of the Rosy Cross – that drew huge crowds: the first Salon, which opened on March 10, 1892, attracted over eleven thousand curious or perhaps merely bemused visitors.

Péladan's often vague mix of arcane symbol, philosophy and purported ancient lore appealed to many poets and artists if nothing else because of its mystic nature, but he was also a convener for them, where for a period in the 1890s the Salon provided a means to share ideas and to exhibit work. The wide influence of Neoplatonism and the occult in this period should also not be underestimated. These were not phenomena that Péladan was responsible for initiating, but he did much to propagate their influence, as Lucie-Smith explains (2001: 12):

Neoplatonism in a general sense was almost as important to the philosophers and aestheticians of the Symbolist Movement as it had been to the pioneers of the New Learning in Florence. In the Symbolist milieu, the philosophers in vogue were Hegel and Schopenhauer, both of whom have an important Neoplatonic component. The occult was cultivated by many Symbolists, and hermeticism was considered to be a virtue. We certainly catch an echo of Plotinus in the formulation offered by the Sâr Péladan, an important if now

rather neglected popularizer of Symbolist ideas. ‘The Beautiful’, he declared in one of his treatises on aesthetics, ‘is an interior vision where the world is clothed in supereminent qualities’.

Many disdained Péladan as simply a charlatan, but he is a figure who was constantly in the background for many of the artists in this book, and whose particular brand of occult symbolism strongly influenced their artistic iconography.

Péladan’s circle also has the characteristic – shared with other fora in which the Symbolists met, such as Mallarmé’s Tuesday literary gatherings – of encouraging cross-fertilization between the different arts. The idea of the universality of poetry was fundamental to their understanding of the nature of their art. Many Symbolists saw music in particular as in a sense the purest form of art, whose symbols most directly unlocked man’s deeper understanding and insight. The musicality of their poetry is therefore key to several Symbolists (Mallarmé being perhaps the most salient example), but contacts were also close between poets and musicians (Mallarmé being especially appreciative of Debussy’s musical rendition of his *The Afternoon of a Faun*). This was also the case for visual artists, whose ties to Symbolist intellectual and literary thought were very close, although in some ways we may think of artistic Symbolism as a phenomenon distinct from, and slightly later than, its literary counterpart. And besides the actual meetings of Symbolist literary and artistic circles, a number of bespoke journals were also a vital engine for the development of Symbolist thought. This is a common characteristic across countries, where the explosion of artistic invention and diversification of styles in the 1880s and 1890s was accompanied by a proliferation of journals.

The most influential journals were in France and Belgium, including *La Plume* (‘The Feather’), *La Revue Blanche* (‘The White Review’) and *La Vogue* (‘The Trend’), as well as more established issues such as the *Mercure de France* (‘Mercury of France’). Largely on the model of these issues, similar journals were founded in other European countries, examples of which we encounter throughout this book. Beyond Symbolist poetry and artworks themselves – for whose dissemination the journals were important vehicles – and artists’ own memoirs, they also permit us to glimpse the world of intellectual thought at the time, and the genesis of Symbolist ideas. And the journals were also the primary vehicle for the internationalization of Symbolism as a movement,

where translations of poetry, articles on Symbolist exhibitions and reprints of theoretical writings helped to spread ideas across borders. Symbolist thinkers frequently published their essays and letters in these journals, tracts which could often be of a strongly polemic nature, as a means to critique and issue ripostes to the proponents of alternative literary dogma and artistic styles. Symbolist literature and art were not universally received with open arms, and certain critics were particularly virulent in detailing their perceived failings. The journals were, moreover, also a battleground for the Symbolists themselves, who did not always see eye to eye. One such example of this was the ire with which the Greek Symbolist thinker Jean Moréas' (1856–1910) *Symbolist Manifesto*, published on 18 September 1886 in the literary supplement of the *Le Figaro* newspaper, was met by some other Symbolists. In his manifesto, which gained wide notoriety, Moréas set out his stall for what he and his followers believed Symbolism was. As Gibson (Gibson and Néret 2011: 31) summarizes:

Moréas' subject was the so-called 'decadent' poets; in his view, 'Symbolist' was a more appropriate description. 'Symbolic poetry', he continued, 'attempts to clothe the Idea in a perceptible form which, though not itself the poem's goal, serves to express the Idea to which it remains subordinate.'

At the same time, in doing so, Moréas had thereby claimed for himself the leadership of the movement. This latter act was particularly resented by others, who did not believe that that leadership should be conferred on him. One such example was the critical response of Kahn (1902: 46), who spoke of Moréas and his confederate the French writer and critic Paul Adam (1862–1920) as having 'obtained the insertion of a somewhat egotistical literary manifesto, in which they described the Symbolist movement after their own colours, assuming the task as their charge, and attempting to appoint themselves as heads of the school'.<sup>14</sup>

While we can only provide the briefest of outlines of literary Symbolism here, it is important context for understanding the development of Symbolism in art. In France and Belgium, artistic Symbolism grew out of its literary forebear, and was similarly characterized by a series of prominent personalities very loosely clustered around a central concept. It is more correct to speak of Symbolism in such terms, than to speak of it as a definite artistic school. The

individual styles of its artists vary widely, sometimes so greatly as to make it questionable whether they really belong to the same movement at all. This variation is not primarily one of geography; two of the major French Symbolists we discuss in depth in this book, Gustave Moreau (1826–98) and Redon, could not in many respects be more different. Yet all of those artists we discuss here share, to greater or lesser degrees, the same preoccupation of the literary Symbolists with a world that is beyond the visible world. That of course meant different things to different artists. Sometimes an identifiable religious inspiration can be detected, sometimes a more individual mysticism, and sometimes the inspiration is primarily nationalist or folkloric in nature. While this may be coloured by local tradition – for example the Russian artist Mikhail Vrubel's (1856–1910) works demonstrate a strong basis in Russian myth and legend, even if they are equally of a highly individual character – Symbolism in art is nonetheless primarily a transnational phenomenon, whose concerns are ultimately of a universal nature and relate to man's essential character and inner world. This is not to say that certain artistic centres – primarily Paris, Brussels, Munich, Vienna and St Petersburg – were not particularly important for the development of Symbolism in art, but this does not detract from the movement's essentially international character, where the artists meeting and working in these centres were themselves often foreigners, moving between them and bringing the influence of international styles home with them on their return to their home countries. It will be unsurprising then that the geographic spread of the artists examined in this book is very wide. It can only attempt to give some idea of just how great the reach of Symbolist ideas in art, and that of the period's international styles more generally, was during this period. An emphasis will also be given to central and eastern Europe, whose Symbolist productions (with the possible exception of Russia) continue to receive insufficient focus in anglophone studies of the subject.

Can we speak of a genesis of artistic Symbolism, in the way we might of literary Symbolism? If anything, the challenge in doing so is still greater. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is the existence of artistic styles in the earlier nineteenth century that bear some, if not all, of the characteristics of Symbolism proper as we intend the term in this book. Pre-Raphaelitism in Britain is one such example, where George Frederick Watts (1817–1904), Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82) are



cases in point. All three artists use myth and symbolism in their paintings in a manner that could be considered to resemble that of their French and Belgian artistic counterparts of the later century. It is also clear that the Pre-Raphaelites had a significant impact on many Symbolist artists, the Dutchman Jan Toorop (1858–1928) – whose mother was British – being a good example of this. As a result, some have identified the origins of Symbolism in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, or class certain of its adherents together with the Symbolists of the rest of Europe. As Lucie-Smith (2001: 49) discusses:

Symbolism is, as Art Nouveau, essentially a continental European phenomenon – but that depends upon us considering the Pre-Raphaelites as wholly distinct. The reality is likely more that the origins of Symbolism may be in part found in the Pre-Raphaelites, certain of whom have been considered essentially Symbolists themselves, particularly George Frederick Watts.

A second challenge arises in delimiting Symbolism as a style. As mentioned above, the very individual nature of the works of Symbolist artists means that drawing common characteristics between them – at least at the level of style – is a problematic exercise. Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> the boundary between Art Nouveau and Symbolism as contemporaneous styles is particularly fluid. Given that Art Nouveau was essentially a decorative style, while Symbolism had its roots in a literary movement, it is inevitable that some artists and many artworks in reality straddle both styles. This is above all true of the German and central European Symbolists we will look at in this book; the preoccupations of the adherents of Art Nouveau's German incarnation, the *Jugendstil* ('Youth Style'), are highly Symbolist in nature, and many of those conventionally considered as working within the *Jugend* style might equally be thought of as Symbolists.<sup>16</sup> In discussing individual Symbolist artists, such distinctions have not therefore been forced, where doing so would have had limited value in practice.

It is important to grasp at the outset that Symbolism, as an artistic movement, makes its appearance in a period which exhibits very broad – one might even say desultory – artistic tendencies. For perhaps the first time in the history of European art, we find a series of what are genuinely international styles, simultaneously pushing in different directions. At the risk of oversimplifying

this dynamic, and focusing primarily – yet somewhat inevitably – on Paris as the cradle of such international styles during the period, we may think of a series of styles that grew out of the perceived need to challenge the dominance of Neoclassicism or, subsequently, of each other. It is probably fair to think of the initial wave of Impressionists in the 1860s, centred around Frédéric Bazille (1841–70), Claude Monet (1840–1926), Berthe Morisot (1841–95), Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) and Alfred Sisley (1839–99), as the first to radically break with the tenets of Neoclassicism, and of the greater part of artistic tradition to date. Yet by the later 1880s and 1890s, the successive diversification of style in the works of the Post-Impressionists had eroded the primacy of what, by that time, could be considered a sort of traditional Impressionism, that which was ultimately premised on the need to turn back to nature and away from the precepts of Academic Salon painting. Removing himself successively to Pont-Aven in Brittany, where he founded an artistic colony, and to Tahiti in French Polynesia, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) radically challenged the direction of contemporary painting, and began to make forays into depicting more of man's inner state. As Gibson (2006: 55) summarizes:

The Pont-Aven filiation was a singular phenomenon affecting several generations of painters. The new understanding of colour out of which it arose was not in itself Symbolist, but under its influence artists rejected the realistic or naturalistic style favoured by those who naively believed in science and progress.

While the Fauvists who followed changed forever the way European art approached landscape painting, and Art Nouveau challenged the traditional principles of decorative and architectural art, the artists whose works we examine in this book thought of themselves as in turn striking out on their own path. To a degree, Gauguin's self-styled 'Synthetist' art provided the Symbolists with their initial cue. But perhaps more than any of their artistic predecessors, they were explicitly concerned with man's inner state. An article in an 1892 edition of the French journal *Mercure de France* (Aurier 1892: 297), 'Notes on G. Albert Aurier', summarized the French critic Albert Aurier's (1865–92) recapitulation of Gauguin's doctrine as follows:

The work of art should be:

1. *Ideist*, since its ideal will be the expression of the idea;
2. *Symbolist*, since it will express this idea through forms;
3. *Synthetist*, since it will write these forms, these signs, according to a general system of understanding;
4. *Subjective*, since the object will never be considered as an object, but as a sign of the idea perceived by the subject;
5. (This is a consequence) *Decorative* – for decorative painting properly so-called, such as it was understood by the Egyptians, very probably by the Greeks and the Primitives, is none other than the manifestation of an art that is at once subjective, synthetic, symbolist and ideist.<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with the ideas of their literary counterparts, there is a strong anti-Naturalist or anti-Realist strain in many of the Symbolist works that we examine in this book. For the Symbolists were very deliberately turning away from depiction of the material world around them, to the dream. For some, that dream was more real than reality itself. That did not mean, though, that certain Symbolist artists were not also immersed in the world around them too. The eroticism of the Parisian underworld, and the fascination it held for many of them, is perhaps the best example of all. Yet even where the material world does enter their art prominently, the tendency is strongly one in which that materiality is itself conceived of primarily as a sort of symbol for an inner reality. As we will see in the chapters which follow, sexuality becomes – through classical metaphor – the signifier for an inner, often unconscious, world.

## Symbolists and the classics

Understanding the Symbolists' ideas is by no means straightforward. Many of their contemporaries found their poetry and art so allusive as to be unfathomable. Their use of the classics – their reference to classical literature, myth, art – is no exception. Making sense of them is perhaps a still greater challenge for the modern reader than it would have been for the Symbolists' contemporaries. The primary reason for this is simple. It is essential to appreciate at the outset, in considering the Symbolists, that their intellectual milieu – as well as the broader context of literary and scientific thought at the turn of the century – was one absolutely steeped in the classics. The sheer

depth of familiarity with classical literature – which remained the cornerstone of the education of social elites across Europe during this period – among the Symbolists' intended readership can at times appear overwhelming to us, given the lesser status the classics enjoy in educational curricula today. And, as we have encountered already in our mention of the Latin library of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*, if anything the Symbolists prided themselves on their classical learning and an understanding of all of that which was less well known among the classical corpus.

A good illustration of this can be found in the Symbolist journal *La Plume*, among whose pages are scattered references to the classics, whether in contributors' poems, artistic submissions, or theoretical essays reflecting on the nature of poetry and art. One contributor, Georges Kerbrat, in a short story entitled 'Les Diners de "La Plume"' ('The "La Plume" Dinners') re-created Plato's *Symposium* in a comic reinterpretation of the Greek philosopher's famous treatise on the nature of love. In that dialogue, Plato imagines an exchange between a number of different interlocutors (some of whom are identifiable as historical personalities among Plato's Athenian contemporaries), with whom he has discuss the nature of love, each setting out their individual understanding of its meaning. The tone of the dialogue is on the whole good-humoured and at times comic, such as the Athenian playwright Aristophanes' exposition on the original three sexes which had been divided, and of love as the quest to seek one's missing other half (providing an explanation of the existence of both homosexuality and heterosexuality).<sup>18</sup> The *Symposium* culminates in Socrates' relating of his exchange with the wise woman Diotima, who explains that man must seek to transcend loving the beauty of the individual to a more general love of all humanity.<sup>19</sup> Resurrecting both the original interlocutors of Plato's dialogue, and its jocular atmosphere, Kerbrat (*Deschamps* 1891: 45–6) has them this time similarly reflect on the nature of art and the role of the artist in society. The figure of Diotima – as in Plato's dialogue – summarizing the more serious reflections at the end of Kerbrat's narrative, expounds a Symbolist philosophy of art worth quoting in full:

A like passion for Beauty and Art has grouped us together here, so let's talk. O my friends, the Republic tolerates us, we artists, because our dream celebrates and ennobles its joys. Ah well! Has not the hour truly come for us to show her at last that we are something more than just her valets, and that

we know – when we should choose to do so – how to form an artistic foyer which prescribes to its members the sanction of worth greater than the commercial approval bestowed by the gift of her prizes and medals? That we might create a school, a judicious court, where art might be drunk in words, where the artist could delight in his emotions, and he might immerse himself in the higher callings that the refinement and imagination of conversation breeds? For some time now we have worked in silence, for some time now we have expended ourselves in an individual labour! Such that would solemnly inaugurate today an aesthetic college, enthroning the new gods of music and poetry, which would by no means exercise the rights of the sponsor over us. Let us affirm our thoughts. Let us bring them together or uncouple them. Let us refine them. Would it not be a commendable thing, excellent, perfect, to translate them into an eloquent word for our particular pleasure? These mirages of the City, or of the Mountain, or of the Ocean that we bear in our dreams, which we submit to the laborious birth of our spirit, to the stricture of a canon according to which its species is formed – how much would they not gain by being agreed together, by being elucidated by every one of us! ... It's not at all that we should form a separate group, isolated in the great contemporary struggle for the triumph of reason – no, I do not say that. But what we ought to do is to force to come together artistic affinities which have no knowledge of one another, and to put them in contact for their greater good. Is there not anything so exalted, suggestive, and sober as a perfect piece of music? Our contacts would describe the beauty that emanates from perfect music. A familiar and uncomplicated attitude ought befit the guests, without haughtiness, light-hearted, tasteful, and polite. And that would be a new *symposion*, more intimate and less pompous than its ancient counterpart.<sup>20</sup>

Kerbrat's story is in itself an excellent summary of both the Symbolists' stated aims for their art, and its existential crisis in respect of these. Crucially, however, the message of this text relies upon its reader's familiarity with Plato's original *Symposium*. An awareness of that text is assumed, for without that understanding Kerbrat's ideal (here voiced by Diotima) of the artistic 'symposium' renewed is meaningless. This is all the more pointed given the final comparison here, where the emphasis is strongly on not only imitating the ancient, but *bettering* it. As we will see in the chapters which follow, this is a powerful current in Symbolist art and thought.

Among the classical corpus it was not, however, ancient philosophy which exerted the primary influence over the Symbolists' imagination. We might rather award that accolade to ancient Greek tragedy. The work of the three great tragedians of ancient Athens, Aeschylus (c. 525–c. 455 BC), Euripides (c. 484–406 BC) and Sophocles (c. 497–405 BC), and that of the very many who subsequently translated and interpreted them, had a major impact both on the way the Symbolists conceived of the past, and how they thought about the human condition. And as for many others in the period, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) writings, and in particular his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), had played a great role in concretizing intellectual conceptions about the essential greatness of Greek tragedy and of its importance to any understanding of the human condition.<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche's construction of a broad polarity between what he termed the Apollonian (reason) and Dionysian (instinct) principles – which he argued were perfectly encapsulated in ancient tragedy – held a particular fascination for the Symbolists and others of their contemporaries in the 1890s who sought to decipher, or simply to represent in their poetry and art, human beings' essential nature. The reach of Nietzsche's ideas on Greek tragedy, and how deeply they affected contemporary art, cannot be underestimated. It is perhaps telling in this respect that we find an essay in the Czech journal *Volné Směry* ('Free Directions') – in turn replaying contemporary French theorists – conceptualizing three great ages of tragedy. Attic tragedy is of course the first:

European civilisation has so far reached three apexes of tragedy, for there were three world crises, which it underwent. The first prize is shared between Aeschylus and Sophocles. The second honour, the honour of being mankind's mouthpiece, which emerged from the mist and wastes of Christian medieval barrenness, wild, beautiful, joyful, free and cruel, a passionate man, but above all his own man, with his own instincts, his own roots, his own desires and destructiveness, at the midpoint of his life, fell to the Englishman Shakespeare. The lion's share of the third age goes without doubt to Ibsen.<sup>22</sup>

Admiration of Attic tragedy (and comedy) was of course neither a novelty of Nietzsche's writings nor new to the Symbolists. Since the Renaissance, the works of the ancient tragedians had long exercised a hold over the imagination of European writers, artists, musicians and playwrights, and the Symbolists' contemporaries the French Parnassian poets, whose largely academic ideal of

classical literature the Symbolists generally held in low regard, continued to strive to emulate its formal qualities. Yet Attic tragedy, and above all the plays of Sophocles, acquired a new resonance with the Symbolists. Illustrative of the nature of this, in many ways new, chapter in the history of the reception of ancient tragedy are the artistic works that it inspired. Alongside the text of the above excerpt, the editors of *Volné Směry* placed a reproduction of a sculpture by the Czech artist František Bílek (1872–1941), entitled *Allegory of Our Age* (1895).<sup>23</sup> Inspired by the writhing figural sculpture of the Frenchman Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Bílek represents an emaciated male bent double on the floor, apparently contorted with pain and weighed down by his cares. It is telling that this association is made between the sculptural representation of more desperate states of human emotion, and Greek tragedy. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the plight of the tragic heroes of Sophocles' plays – and above all that of Oedipus – had a profound impact on the Symbolists.

Yet the Symbolist fascination with Attic tragedy was not only a result of its direct, and poignant, representation of human emotion. It is also symptomatic of a broader idealization of the classical world by the Symbolists. That idealization is a complex phenomenon, which is highly individual to particular Symbolist writers and artists, and accordingly endlessly idiosyncratic in its diversity. But broadly speaking, we may speak of an ideal common to many Symbolists that associated the classical world with the free expression of feelings and emotions, and above all those of a sexual nature. Where we speak of the classical world, we must do so loosely, because for many Symbolists this was closely associated with a similarly idealized (and not necessarily historical) notion of the Near East, or Orient. The Symbolists' classical ideal was most often articulated as an expression of praise for the religious culture of antiquity, usually conceived of as pagan in nature. That paganism had its own aesthetic attractions for the Symbolist poet and artist, but this dynamic also had much to do with a rejection of Christianity – at least to the extent that it was perceived as having put paid to the cherished emotional and sexual liberality of the ancient world. Again, the Symbolists followed the cue of Nietzsche in making this turn towards a pre-Christian world – though it should be noted that this was not exclusively the case for all Symbolists (see discussion below). There was nonetheless a clear current that ran through Symbolist thought which found in its ideal of the ancient pagan a reflection of what it valued, from

which stemmed a valorization of classical religion. The pagan-empathetic, Christian-denigrating aspect of the movement is well-summed up in an essay in *La Plume* (Boës 1902: 270) by the critic Alcide Guérin on the French poet and essayist Laurent Tailhade (1854–1919), in which Guérin praised Tailhade for his appreciation of the pagan:

The taste for the exquisite is natural to artists. And among the poets of his generation, I cannot at all see one who is more the artist than Laurent Talhade. He is it in his exterior life and in his interior life, in the smallest movements of his person and of his thought. But to this devotee of Forms and of Colours, the supernatural beauty of the Christian soul was not enough. Thus we see him immediately turn towards the artistic and religious sensualities of paganism; it is from Greece that he asks for an aesthetic and a faith. Yes, Laurent Talhade is a pagan, a pagan by poetic temperament and by philosophical preference, a pagan, without doubt, who has in his veins Christian blood and that the church thus simultaneously attracts and irritates, who hates it in its dogma, in its mysteries, in its discipline, but who loves it in its ceremonies, in its art, in the tenderness of its morality, in its liturgy, in its very expressions, with such an expressive and terrifying precision.<sup>24</sup>

Another essay in *Mercure de France*, ‘On the *First Pastoral Book*’, a panegyric on the French poet and associate of Moréas and the French writer Anatole Baju (1861–1903), Maurice du Plessys (1864–1924), similarly discusses ancient Greek religion. Du Plessys had had much recourse to Greek religion, something he had been criticized for by the Occultists of the time. Yet, as the author complains in *Mercure de France* (Aurier 1892: 203), in his view the Occultists had themselves turned their backs upon this pure source of inspiration – and, moreover, had done so unwitting of the fact that it was the original inspiration for their own mysticism:

He is also criticised for his return to Greek fable; but religions being only a way of thinking, it is praiseworthy for the sage to support that which suits him, and if the Roman poets took up the Hellenic myth, it was because it alone provided sufficient substance for the most daring enterprises of the dream, because it alone offered sufficiently powerful signs to translate the most complex ‘states of existence’, because in a word it is alone capable of leading the spirit to its greatest degree of fulfilment. And



this is the place to recall to the neomystics and Kabbalists of today that this religion, which they reject as a refractory of vague dreaming, for its melancholy, and as devoid of any suggestive action, is the cradle of the occultism which has from its legacy inherited the principle of its major divisions.

Let's speak in clear terms. French literature today has only one work to consume, I'd even say but one *raison d'être*, and that is to renew the classical tradition, single complete and faithful expression of the national genius. It is this noble French tradition, the heir to Athens and Rome, which must be revived and developed in all of its elements.

It is perhaps a simple observation, but one that it is nonetheless worth bearing in mind, that this idealization of ancient Greek religion and paganism is just that: an idealization. There is occasional interest in aspects of the historical reality of Greek religion among the Symbolists, but this should not be equated with a serious academic or archaeological interest. The Symbolists' interest in ancient paganism is primarily an aesthetic one. Guérin's praise of Talhide and the essay in *La Plume* on du Plessys share this characteristic, as do the works of many of the artists we will examine in this book.

The Symbolists' turning to a mystical past was, however, not as simple as an interest in the aesthetics of ancient Greek religion, motivated by a rejection of Christian morality. The tradition of Christian art – particularly in its medieval and early Renaissance manifestations – also played a major role in inspiring them. At one level this was for similarly aesthetic reasons, where the mysticism of the Catholic tradition in particular appealed to a number of French artists. In some cases it was also a result of artists' own religious beliefs – which were easily blended by degrees with the various forms of mysticism that were current at the *fin-de-siècle*. The mysticism of medieval Christian art was frequently eulogized. Another commentator in *Volné Směry* (Kotěra et al. 1900: 117), described his contemporaries' desire for a new art in terms of a revival of the spirituality of Christian art:

We long for an art of Expression, such as was the art of the great Christian era: an art of quiet nobility, the synthesis of the greatest struggles of the human spirit, that is to say prayer. And our era is unsettled, searching, cosmopolitan and historical, whose inclination carries within it the seeds of death. But we are entering a new age.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most important artists for this study, the French Symbolist Redon (1922: 16) speaks in his memoirs explicitly about the inspiration he received from the church and of its impact on his art:

The great emotion was the hour of my first communion, beneath the vaults of the church of Saint-Seurin; the songs exalted me, they were truly my first artistic revelation.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, as was the case for their interest in the ancient world and its religion, the Symbolist fascination with the Christian Middle Ages, its art and its mystical aesthetic was not an interest of a historical nature. Cassou (1988: 12) – who (somewhat summarily) rejects the notion that literary Symbolism found inspiration in classical antiquity – summarizes this mystic medievalism as follows:

The outstanding characteristic of these European literary groups at that time appeared in a taste which they shared for a certain past era, which was definitely not the Antiquity of the classics, nor the German, Spanish or Italian Middle Ages of the Romantics. This was another Middle Ages, less historic and on the contrary imprecise, irregular and legendary ... The Symbolists only needed a confused past, and they were fascinated with the confusion.

The complexity of the Symbolists' engagement with both real and hypothetical pasts is heightened still more by a strain within the movement – symptomatic of its time – that questioned this obsession with the past, seeing in the present age a greater well of inspiration. The French writer Eugène Montfort (1877–1936), in an article in *La Plume* (Boës 1902: 48/50) entitled 'Eternal Life and Art in Contemporary Life', poses the rhetorical question of whether this turning towards the past was in fact mistaken:

Ought I regret Greece and its harmony, Rome and its might, the Middle Ages and its mystery, the Renaissance and its passion, when I have modern life and its soul? ... Artists, let us not be enemies of our time.<sup>27</sup>

For a majority of Symbolists, there was no simple reconciliation between possible favoured pasts, at times of their own invention, or between a certain escapism to those pasts and their fascination with the age in which they lived. Something that we see with many Symbolist artists is the attempt to synthesize

different pasts in their creations, or else to synthesize the past and the present (or both at once). Sometimes the attempt to synthesize the best of the pagan and the Christian is something explicitly articulated by artists. As Cassou (1988: 43) describes of the German artist Max Klinger (1857–1920):

Max Klinger ... dreamed of an art which would realize the synthesis of heathenism and Christianity, he aspired to the Symbolism of Nietzsche which was often declamatory.

Redon, greatly influenced by his friend the French botanist Armand Clavaud (1828–90), speaks of the latter in similar terms:

In the plastic arts, he tasted the serene vision of Greece as well as the expressive dream of the Middle Ages ... I thus owe to meetings with this friend, of such a lucid intelligence, the first exercise of my spirit and taste.<sup>28</sup>

One consequence of the Symbolists' simultaneous draw to both the classical and medieval worlds is their strong interest in Byzantium. This is particularly apparent in the literary interests of the Symbolist writers – of which we have already encountered one example in the Latin library of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* – but for many Symbolists this period had a wider resonance because of its association with imperial decline and fallen grandeur, whose connotations could easily be read across to the *fin-de-siècle*. Kahn (1902: 37–8) summarized as follows:

There was certainly a curiosity towards past ages that one termed faded ... 'decadent', while the logic of their existence had long since been revealed by Amédée Thierry; Fustel's research was not without resonance, the small Latin play of the *Flowers of Evil* bore fruit; on all sides anthologies of low Latin plays were being prepared; it was later Mr. Gourmont who made happen, for his part, these earlier projects that he was doubtless unaware of. There was also the idea that the Prussians of 70 had been barbarians, that Paris was Rome or Byzantium; the novels of Zola, *Nana*, had underlined the metaphor.<sup>29</sup>

However, given that the Symbolists' interest in past ages was primarily not of a historical nature, it is perhaps natural that they were far more inclined towards classical mythology, than they were towards classical history. A majority of the works of art that we look at in this book are representations, in

one form or another, of Greek myth. This is not to imply a particular preference for Greek or Latin sources, for as we will see artists drew freely on both as part of a shared tradition, even if they entertained a marked preference – as had their predecessors since the Renaissance – for the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–AD 17) and his light-hearted mythological epic the *Metamorphoses*. Yet Symbolist depictions of myth rarely involve simple replaying of its narratives, such as we find in Academic art. This was for the reason that the Symbolists' primary interest was of course in the 'symbol,' not in allegory. Their readings of Greek myth, then, tend less towards being fables, seeking to explain, demonstrate a truth or set a moral example, but rather use myth as a means to symbolize mystic or spiritual worlds. This varies by degrees depending on different artists' individual interpretations of myth, but the general tendency is one of less direct and more allusive representations of myth than had been the case in Academic art. As Cassou (1984: 157) puts it:

The myth, properly so called, is only Symbolist if it is the bearer of several possible meanings, and the setting for mystery. It draws towards an unknown which it never permits to reach. That is why the Symbolist poets were attracted to ambiguous figures: fauns, chimeras, hermaphrodites ... The Symbolists believed that, as in Dionysian religion, mythological characters were possessed by the forces of nature.

As Gibson (2006: 35) similarly argues of Moreau, this dynamic also applies to the Symbolists' erotic interpretations of myth:

biblical and mythological subjects do not, in themselves, make a painting Symbolist. Moreau fits into this category because he chose subjects which gave expression to the fantasies – one might almost say psychodrama – of sexual roles and identity that characterise his age.

What can we say about the Symbolists' understanding of and engagement with classical literature? It has already been hinted at above that the Symbolists' intellectual circle was one thoroughly steeped in the literary and artistic inheritance of the classical world. For the Symbolist painters this was not something new or particular to them, but rather an inheritance of the traditions of Neoclassical and Academic art. A majority of Symbolist painters will have had the study of classical art and its Renaissance and Neoclassical descendants as the mainstay of their artistic training. Yet in many cases their reception of

the classics was not just second-hand; it is clear that several artists also had a direct relationship with ancient literature, with their philological education occasionally also permitting them to engage with classical texts in the original language. One consequence of this first-hand engagement is how personal artists' reinventions of classical myth can end up being – as in, to take just two examples, the cases of Redon and the Belgian Symbolist illustrator Félicien Rops (1833–98). Redon (1922: 69) – discussing Homeric epic in particular – spells this out explicitly: 'The epics are the great monuments of humanity: purely literary works say a lot less; translation already robs them of a certain part of their beauty.'<sup>30</sup> Rops, whose letters make very clear how immersed he was in both French and classical literature, goes as far as interspersing them with Latin quotation.<sup>31</sup> As we will see, this exercised a profound impact upon the subject matter of his illustrations.

This direct engagement with classical literature by Symbolist artists echoes that of their literary counterparts. The essay on du Plessys in *Mercur de France* referenced above (Aurier 1892: 197–8) is telling for how it praises the vividness of his classicism, in contrast to the stultified Neoclassical poetry of the Parnassians, where it comments on du Plessys' meeting with Moréas:

He who had traversed the literature in jest, was moved by contact with this fervent priest of the Muses, who goes on this earth indifferent to all that is not divine . . . He no longer worked by fortune of where he found himself in the smoke of the cabarets, but in the shadow of the libraries, with discipline and method. He translated Homer, Sophocles. He relearned Virgil's texts. One would meet him by night in the arms of Moréas, imbibing the Attic speech . . . With marvellous delicacy he at once teased out what was special in this spirit still mixed up in the impure waves of a pretended symbolism.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed the Symbolists could be very critical of anything they perceived as superficial, including among their own ranks. The author (Aurier 1892: 198) continues:

At the hour when the *Figaro* manifesto appeared, the symbolists and decadents were vying for attention. As different as they seemed, they were both the product of a common error: Romanticism. The decadents had taken from the Romantics the exaggerated sense of colour; they had fallen into Japonism, into pointillism, into the coloured audition. The symbolists had inherited the taste of the Romantics for the macabre and the nebulous.

They waded into a barbaric incoherence which had the pretence of being one of the dream. Led on by an abuse of ignoble analogies which they dressed up in the pompous name of symbolism, they reached the point of translating into a vulgar patois the alcoholic or artificial hallucinations that Baudelaire had at least raised to the solemnity of an academic style.<sup>33</sup>

The Symbolists continued to entertain an ideal of the classical world and often – as generations of poets and artists before them since the Renaissance – sought to realize this ideal in journeys to modern Italy and Greece. Several undertook variations of the ‘Grand Tour’, to see the artistic glories of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, something which remained a standard venture for artists. Yet despite this, after two centuries of seeking to realize the impossible ideal of finding the ancient world in the modern Mediterranean, for some artists there was a sense that the ancient glories were dead and gone. For Rops (1912: 26–7) Italy had itself become a sort of museum, a repository of the great art of the past; for a true artist, fresh inspiration was to be found not there, but rather in the modern metropolises of London or Paris:

Italy is a land that one goes to see and in which one has one’s pleasure, but in which one must take care not to find one’s inspiration. If the art is retrospective, then it is dangerous; if from today’s Italy, it tends to be banal and lacking that particular slant that London and Paris have in such terrifying and favourable measure for psychological art – the only true modern art. Today’s Italian art doesn’t work . . . Italy is a country in which the climate, the plastic beauty of its maidens, and past artistic glories please you.<sup>34</sup>

The sentiment expressed by Rops to some degree reflects the shift in artistic centres during the later nineteenth century. Where artists from northern Europe had long gathered in Rome, Paris had superseded the former’s supremacy. Other cities in the north had also become more prominent as regional centres of art – particularly, for the Symbolists, Brussels, Vienna, Munich and London. James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and the Pre-Raphaelites in England – as later the ‘Glasgow Four’ in Scotland; the adherents of Art Nouveau in Paris, Nancy and Brussels; and the artists of the Secession movements in Vienna, Munich, Budapest, Prague and Krakow – had given impetus to new decorative styles in the applied arts that were accelerating artists’ turning away from Academic classicism. Russia and the Baltic also

witnessed the strong emergence of Symbolist thought in literature, music and the visual arts. In the recognition that Symbolism was an international phenomenon, while there is naturally a particular weighting towards French and Belgian artists as the primary originators of the movement, this book takes a broad geographical outlook to considering Symbolist receptions of the classics and the Greek body. Equally, given the movement's internationalism, national differences within those receptions have not been overplayed.

## The Greek body

The titular reference of this book to the 'Greek' body is not accidental. Symbolist classical reception in art has a very direct concern with ancient Greek sculpture, and primarily late classical Greek sculpture. Indeed we can go beyond this. It has a direct relationship with a handful of particular sculptures dating principally from the first half of the fourth century BC, known either in the original or (more often) in marble copies from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. At a push, these might even be counted on one hand.

First, a point of terminology. We might have talked about the 'classical' body, rather than the 'Greek' one. The latter has been chosen because Symbolist artists overwhelmingly favoured late classical Greek sculpture in their transformations of ancient art. Some did express an interest in Roman art too, or earlier archaic Greek sculpture (of which we encounter examples in later chapters), but this is far less common. There are a number of reasons for this but, as Neoclassicists before them since the German archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) had articulated the superiority of classical Greek art,<sup>35</sup> the Symbolists clearly continued to find the highest ideal of the human form in the sculpture of this period. A few particular sculptures and sculptors were such a universally seminal influence for Symbolist artists that they must be named here. And in naming them, the primarily erotic nature of their interest in the Greek body is immediately obvious. Most prominent are the works of Praxiteles (active c. 370–c. 330 BC), the Athenian sculptor, whose famous nudes had a profound impact on the Symbolists, as they had had on generations of artists before them. Above all others, his *Aphrodite of Knidos*<sup>36</sup> (Figure 2) is endlessly repeated as a motif in Symbolist art, albeit in a thousand

different variations. Even in antiquity she had had a long afterlife, inspiring multiple Hellenistic and Roman derivatives. Several of these, including among others the *Crouching Venus*<sup>37</sup> (Figure 3) and *Aphrodite Anadyomene* ('Aphrodite Rising from the Ocean')<sup>38</sup> (Figure 4), had also been popular with collectors and artists since the Renaissance, in turn inspiring further imitations. Moreover, the iconic Hellenistic sculpture the *Venus of Milo*,<sup>39</sup> similarly a mainstay of Neoclassicism since it was acquired by France during the Napoleonic era, had a continued appeal for contemporary artists. While several of these interpretations of Aphrodite were in practice known from later Hellenistic copies or Roman marbles, all aspired to a similar late classical Greek archetype and it is this that recurs in one form or another in several of the Symbolists' works.<sup>40</sup> But, as we will see in our discussion of the male body, Praxiteles' depictions of the male youth were also very influential for the Symbolists,



**Figure 2** Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos* (Hellenistic copy of second century BC). Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – Rogers Fund, 1912.

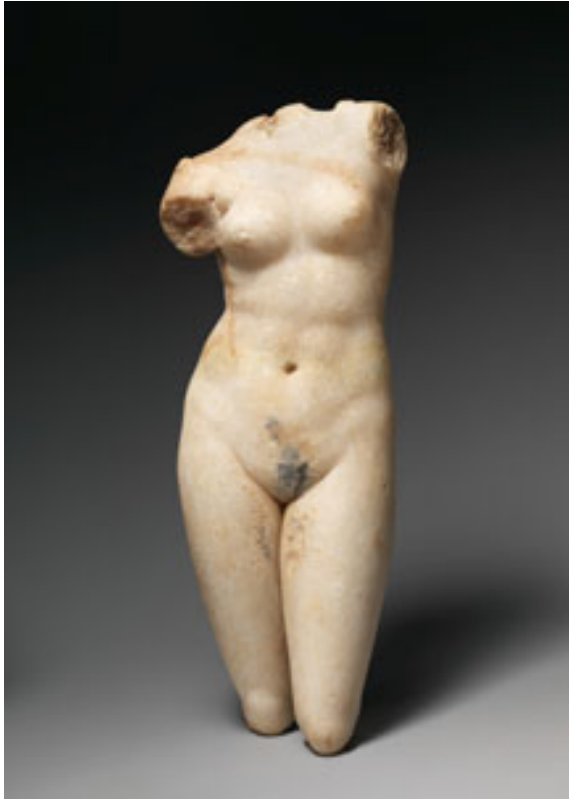


principally the *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus*<sup>41</sup> (attribution contested) and the *Hermes Sauroktonos*<sup>42</sup> (Figure 5), as were the later Roman statues in the Vatican, the *Belvedere Hermes*<sup>43</sup> and the *Apollo Belvedere*,<sup>44</sup> whose attribution to Greek originals is today uncertain but which was generally believed at the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>45</sup>

What are the common characteristics of these sculptures? For the female form, after the *Aphrodite of Knidos* above all, we might speak of slender proportions, an elongated torso and limbs and a long neck, as well as relatively small breasts; and of Praxiteles' trademark characteristic, endlessly repeated in Roman copies, of the S-curve posing of the figure in contrapposto, with shoulder raised on one side and hip lowered on the other. For the male, the sculptures mentioned and those that followed their example similarly tended



**Figure 3** *Crouching Venus* (Roman copy of first or second century AD, after Hellenistic original of third or second century BC).



**Figure 4** *Aphrodite Anadyomene* ('Aphrodite Rising from the Ocean') (first century AD). Courtesy age fotostock/Alamy Stock Photo.

towards a common standard of the slender, lissom, handsome but not overly muscular, and sometimes androgynous adolescent youth, generally also in contrapposto. The works of the late classical Greek sculptor Lysippus (c. 390 – after 316 BC), likewise endlessly repeated in Roman marble copies, were also popular with artists, presenting a slight variation on Praxiteles' paradigm, somewhat more muscular but sharing the same elongated proportions. For both female and male the facial features are regular and fine, the hair usually a tight mass of small curls. Throughout this book when we speak of the 'Greek body' it is to this fairly narrow archetype of classical Greek sculpture that we refer. That is not to imply that there are not alternative paradigms of the body in Greek archaic and later Hellenistic art, or that even within classical Greek art the human form was depicted in a constant manner. Nor is it to overlook



**Figure 5** *Hermes Sauroktonos* (Roman adaptation after Praxiteles of the first/second century AD). Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – Fletcher Fund, 1924.

the fact that in many cases we are reliant on later Roman interpretations of the Greek originals mentioned. But it is to this particular classical body that the Symbolists primarily looked, and the term ‘Greek body’ is therefore used deliberately in this specific sense.

The existing literature on the afterlife of Greek sculpture in European art is extensive. Moreover there is growing interest in classical reception during the *fin-de-siècle*. This book is, however, the first attempt to give systematic consideration to the erotic reception of Greek art in the painting and sculpture of the Symbolists, and to do so from a pan-European perspective. Aspects of this dynamic have been examined in the case of individual artists, particularly the most famous French and Belgian Symbolists, such as Moreau or Redon. Here we rather consider in a comparative manner how Greek art was transformed by Symbolist artists. A number of other studies cover part of this

– or closely related – ground, including the ancient body, its reception in later literature and art, and its role in the articulation of gender and the erotic. Prettejohn has in several works looked at the reception of Greek sculpture in later art, including her *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture: Greek Sculpture and Modern Art from Winckelmann to Picasso* (2012). In several publications Wyke has also considered the ancient body and its reception, for example her and Hopkins' *Roman Bodies: Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (2006), *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity* (1998) and – specifically on erotic receptions of the classics – *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representation* (2007). Langlands' research has similarly focused on the erotic afterlife of the classics, including her and Fisher's *Sex, Knowledge, and Receptions of the Past* (2015). And others such as Penrose (*Postcolonial Amazons*, 2016) have considered this dynamic in specific historical contexts. German literature on the reception of ancient sculpture is also extensive, encompassing a number of studies on specific aspects of the transformation of Greek art, including Bartsch's *Das Originale der Kopie* (2010) and Kansteiner's *Pseudoantiker Skulptur* (2016), to cite but two examples.

Important context for a study of this nature, there has also been a particular focus in classical reception literature on the afterlife of Greek tragedy, with recent studies elucidating specific examples of this dynamic. Hall and Mackintosh's *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre* (2005) looks at British receptions, while Bosher, Justine, Macintosh and Rankine's *Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (2015) considers Greek drama in the New World. More recently, Billings (2017) has explored the role of Greek tragedy in German philosophy. Other studies have focused rather on ancient epic, which as tragedy had a profound impact on certain Symbolists – Efstathiou and Karamanou's *Homeric Receptions across Generic and Cultural Contexts* (2016) being one example. Hall (2004, 2012, 2016) has looked at transformations of Greek myth, including in erotic contexts, while Doherty's *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (2015) and Simonis and Simonis' *Mythen in Kunst und Literatur: Tradition und kulturelle Repräsentation* (2004) provide good summaries of the background to reception in this field. The study of the ancient body in its original context is of course a separate field but also relevant to any consideration of its afterlife, where Wyke's *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (1998) and Fögen and Lee's *Bodies and*

*Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (2009) might be taken as illustrative examples.

The wider literature on the reception of the classics is extensive and a full survey cannot be provided here.<sup>46</sup> Seminal work in anglophone classical reception studies has included that of Armstrong (2008), Carne-Ross and Haynes (2010), Grafton, Most and Settis (2013), Hardwick and Harrison (2014), Hardwick and Stray (2011), Kallendorf (2007), Martindale and Thomas (2006) (see Prettejohn's 2006 essay on the *Venus of Milo*, referenced above), Parker and Mathews (2011), Payne, Kuttner and Smick (2014), and Richardson (2017). Marchand (2003) provides a good overview of the background of German philhellenism. Several important studies on the transformation of the classics have also been published by the German research group on *Transformationen der Antike*, including Böhme, Rapp and Rösler (2011).<sup>47</sup> And in francophone scholarship, Finley and Ladjadj-Koenig's *L'héritage de la Grèce* (2009) and Moatti's *A la recherche de la Rome antique* (1989) look at the reception of ancient Greece and ancient Rome respectively, while Laurens' *Histoire critique de la littérature latine. De Virgile à Huysmans* (2014) provides an extensive analysis of the afterlife of Latin literature – including by Symbolist writers. A number of studies have also been published on nineteenth-century artistic receptions of the classics in Britain.<sup>48</sup> There continue to be fewer anglophone studies of central and eastern European classical reception contexts than of western ones.

What can we say about the ways in which the Symbolists received and transformed the Greek body? The first thing to note is that for a majority of Symbolists Greek art was primarily an ideal. That dynamic was not new to the Symbolists, but is essential to understanding almost every transformation of Greek art that we encounter in their work. This is by no means to say that these transformations were not of a highly individual nature – they diverge most from their artistic predecessors in *how* they approached the high altar of Greek art. But a majority of Symbolists continued to consider the legacy of ancient Greece as a font of inspiration, taking it as an authentic expression of human beings' true nature and inner world. And here we find a clue as to why the Symbolists found this ideal in Greek art, for it was not for the same reasons as their forebears. Where Academic classicism had primarily seen in Greek art something to be emulated for the clarity of its ideas, its architectural order and

artistic form – and above all for the power of order and reason that these symbolized – the Symbolists found in the classics something quite different. What exactly they found in ancient art, literature and myth of course varied depending on the particular inclinations of the artist in question – and as we will see in the chapters that follow, this variation was very great indeed – but if they were united by any common factor in how they thought about Greek art (and religion), it is that they discovered in it a vehicle for the expression of feeling and emotion.

This is something that emerges strongly both in theoretical Symbolist writings and the memoirs of Symbolist artists. An essay in *Volné Směry* by the Czech art critic Karel Madl (1859–1932) (Kotěra et al. 1900: 192), entitled ‘On the New Art’, sets the scene well in helping us to understand the starting point for the Symbolists and their contemporaries in engaging with ancient art:

I’ll give here as example our ideal of Greek art. When I enter into it and I understand, then I see that the reason that this art seems to me an ideal is not to be found in its form, but instead in the truthfulness with which it was created, and it is with this that I am concerned. The art, which the Greek expressed in accordance with his purpose and location (climate) through the form of his utterly constructive creation of space – let us moderns take strength from this art as follows: that we might wish too in our own form to express just such a fine constructive creation of space. Ancient form taken on wholesale, cannot be our ideal and aim – the Ideal which we find in any art can only be relative.<sup>49</sup>

It is clear from Madl’s article that for the Symbolists Greek art continued to play the role that it had for previous generations of artists – at least insofar as it retained its character of in some sense remaining *the* original art. But Madl’s comment also shows that the manner in which that ideal had in the past been received and translated had begun to be questioned. That questioning was less about seeking to unseat Greek art from its throne, as some other artistic movements had attempted, but was rather a reorientation in the understanding of why Greek art should be the ideal in the first place.

That turning back to an original ideal of Greek art is also present in Symbolist poetry, which occasionally references the glories of ancient art directly (often alongside classical myth and philosophy). The French Symbolist Verlaine’s poetry is utterly steeped in classical myth and metaphor. In his series

of poems, the *Fêtes Gallantes* ('Gallant Festivities'), the imagery of classical sculpture – often closely associated with the erotic – is frequent. In the final verse of his poem 'Croquis Parisien' ('Parisian Sketch'), he refers directly to the Athenian sculptor of the Parthenon Phidias (c. 490–430 BC):<sup>50</sup>

So I went along, dreaming of the divine Plato  
And of Phidias,  
And of Salamis and of Marathon,  
Under the blinking eye of the blue gas lamps.<sup>51</sup>

Redon (1922: 176) also explicitly states his admiration for Phidias in the context of discussing artistic greatness, discussing:

great eras, when a civilisation has blossomed freely and is thus able to rise without hindrance towards the truth. Example: Phideas, Leonardo da Vinci, sacred types who raised art to inaccessible plastic heights, perhaps forever lost, and towards which the greatest spirits torture themselves unendingly in loving, praying and memorialising.<sup>52</sup>

Klinger was another artist who took the inheritance of classical art very seriously. He was highly critical of what he saw as its false receptions, telling of the high esteem in which he held it. In his theoretical text *Painting and Drawing* he returns to a sort of first principle that the greatness of ancient art stemmed from its understanding of the nude. Klinger's (1885: 56) discussion of this subject is worth citing in full, given how revealing it is of Symbolist attitudes towards ancient art more generally:

When we look at the works of the greatest masters, we thus find – particularly in the case of Antiquity – strong evidence for what has been said. They were masters of the garment, because they were masters of the human form. Do we today have that sense of clothing in our understanding of the body? Their greatest creations almost all involve the garment or part of the garment: Harmodios and Aristogeiton, a number of Niobids, Laocoon, the Venus of Milo, the Apollo Belvedere, and the Iphigenia with Orestes in Naples, to name but a few. How do these wear their garments? In a manner that deliberately leaves the torso uncovered. Its development of form, either from one shoulder to the knees or the whole body from the mid-thighs upwards, freely shows the whole beauty of the body. The garment only covers parts of the body that are duplicated elsewhere, so that for the most important

construction points the observer is left in no doubt about the body's movement and its development.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, as Klinger (1885: 57–8) laments, today the rightful place of the body in art has been utterly lost:

Unfortunately we have to confess that in all of today's artistic movements the representation of the human body has receded into the background, neglected in favour of the novel, the historical, the archaeological and the so-called social tendency ... But one has only revived dead material, moribund styles – whether it be the Renaissance or Greece ... When one considers the artistic styles of all time, one realises without any difficulty that every self-affirming artistic era knew how to conceive and draw the human body in their own way. Egyptians or Greeks, Japanese or Renaissance artists, everyone had the simple human form, which has remained the same for thousands of years.<sup>54</sup>

For Klinger (1885: 59), a cardinal crime of many modern artists is to fall into a sort of false classicism, something he characterizes as a movement away from the purity of the Greek body, and for which he finds part of the fault in its degeneration by earlier artists: 'The way we are obliged to work today – the bad Bernini-esque conception of the body – in which today's newest artists are deeply but unknowingly stuck or else do not allow themselves to go beyond a flat and false antiquating, originating in the study of bad models.'<sup>55</sup> The Rococo, which Klinger (1885: 51) considered one of the worst offenders in this respect, had contributed to a situation whereby 'a great revolution was needed against the false Greece and its colourless classicizing art, in order truly to found the total art form [*Gesamtkunstwerk*].'<sup>56</sup> The contemporary ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which many believed to be realized in the operas of Richard Wagner, emphasized the need for an uncompromising single artwork combining in itself all forms of art: music, poetry, drama and the visual arts. Of most interest for our purposes is that Klinger's (1885: 54) criticism also extended to a perceived false prudery associated with the nude, which for him was something which simply did not exist in ancient art:

From our youth onwards, the grandeur and beauty of antique art and the art of the Middle Ages is established for us as an ideal. In Germany we marvel at their works – fortunately undamaged – in our museums, yet our energetic



study of them is utterly broken by virtue of our timidity in portraying and exhibiting the nude in our own works. Through education and our role models we are simultaneously provided with a great aim and prevented from its realisation in the practice of our profession. Accordingly, either the vaunted masters are false ideals, or we are not mature enough to be their students. Only the possibility of being able to express fully whole and great feeling moves us to study, and to execution. That which I may not show the public I have otherwise no reason to undertake.<sup>57</sup>

The artist's views summarize well this essential concern with the energy and vitality of the Greek body. For many Symbolists there was an inherent mystery in this power of the nude, a mystery which the Greeks had captured so skilfully, and yet so candidly, in their sculpture. This in part explains why many Symbolists had an active dislike of Impressionism. Redon (1922: 91) was one such critic:

There is nothing intellectual about a painter who, having painted a naked woman, leaves us with the notion that that woman is about to get dressed again. The intellectual painter shows her to us in a nudity that convinces us, because she's not hiding it; it leaves her in an Eden, with no shame, to be observed not by us but by the mental world, an imaginary world created by the artist where such a beauty has free rein that never caused shamelessness, but on the contrary confers on all nudity a pure characteristic which does not abase us. The naked women of Puvis de Chavannes never reclothe themselves, such as many others in the past, in the charming gynoeceum of a Giorgione, of a Correggio. There is a nude in Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, who hastens to get dressed again after the irritation of her discomfort on the cold grass, in the presence of the men with no ideals who surround her and talk to her. What are they saying? Nothing beautiful, I suspect.

As concerns painting nothing but material objects, even very well and with virtuosity, one takes a pleasure in this such as one would in painting the robe that conceals her. To paint a fabric, textiles – how much more honest and purely decisive is that than to represent the nude for the nude, that is to say something of the human being without any heroism?<sup>58</sup>

For Redon, as for many other Symbolists, there was a certain expectation that the 'heroic' nature of the nude should be preserved and not reduced to a depiction of an actual woman in a real setting. Again, we detect in this the Symbolist

criticism of Realism, chiming with the concerns of Aurier's fifth principle of Symbolist art (cited above), where he speaks of the need for the work of art to be 'decorative', and 'none other than the manifestation of an art that is at once subjective, synthetic, symbolist and ideist'. For Redon, Manet's nude in *Luncheon on the Grass* is irretrievably impoverished for this reason – there is nothing 'ideist' in it, and as a result it loses its essential decorative quality as a work of art. Yet, it is important that we understand Redon's term 'heroism' here in its broadest possible sense. As we will see in our chapters on the female body, Rops is a case in point: he *was* fascinated by the eroticism of the real women he encountered, but his work may be considered Symbolist for how it transposed that eroticism to something beyond the individuality of those women. And, as for Redon and others, for Rops classical myth and literature were essential to that transposition, and to the embodiment of woman's symbolic eroticism.

How did the Symbolists encounter the Greek body? This is an essential consideration if we are to understand the process of its reception. We can speak both of direct receptions and of indirect ones, and both of classical art and of classical literature. It must be registered at the outset, however, that the mediation of the classics through the early Renaissance is a key factor in many Symbolist receptions. Moreau's relationship with the art of the Italian painter and classicist Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) is a case in point, something strongly noted by his contemporaries and affecting their critical response to his art. More broadly the idealization of the mystery of Italian Renaissance painting affected the aesthetic of the Symbolist reception of the classics as a whole. Lucie-Smith (2001: 12) summarizes the Symbolist relationship with Renaissance artists as follows:

Botticelli, together with Mantegna, was one of the great influences upon the Symbolist art of the late nineteenth century ... the apparent obscurity of some of Botticelli's symbols only added to the allusive richness which so appealed to his nineteenth-century admirers. Much the same can be said of Mantegna, who influenced a wide spectrum of French and English Symbolists, not merely because of his taste for linear stylization, but because of his tendency to load every rift with ore. His rock-formations re-appear in Moreau and Burne-Jones, while the beautiful group of Mercury and Pegasus, on the right-hand side of Mantegna's *Parnassus* (in the Louvre from 1801) is clearly the ancestor of a similar group in the work of Picasso and Redon.

In the case of certain Symbolists – particularly Moreau and Redon – we must therefore avoid the temptation to consider their transformations of classical myth and art in isolation, not only from those of their literary contemporaries, but also from those of earlier artists, such as Mantegna and the Florentine Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), who were themselves keen enthusiasts of the classics.

Yet it is also true that many Symbolists did have a direct relationship with classical art. Klinger's (1885: 6) idolization of Greek vase painting is one such example; in his *Painting and Drawing* he speaks of its 'contours and compositions . . . attaining, in the hands of Greek and Etrurian vase painters, the most wonderful rhythm and charm'.<sup>59</sup> There can be little doubt when reading this text that the artist's knowledge of classical art was based upon first-hand observation. As Klinger (1885: 39–40) later continues, in a similar vein, comparing classical Greek art with that of later antiquity:

The Greek and Etruscan vase painters – the greatest masters of the contour – evidence the separation of aesthetics in drawing and sculpture, given that very little exists by way of painting. In any case, we only find comparisons with these compositions in vessels that are the work of the latest Roman period. The grotesque alterations of the body, absurd monstrosities and pronounced preference for the strongest movements are in great contrast to the wondrous unity and calm of works of the same period. Nor can one object that these are works of craftsmanship. Despite all their sketchiness, these works are artworks in the truest sense. I see in them a manifestation of the antique genius, who treated different materials with an innate, varying spirit that was relative to purpose and meaning. On the one hand, great forms and a never-failing development of appearance, and on the other, in little life full of sensuality, wit and vitality, the tightest formation of contour.<sup>60</sup>

Klinger was an artist who was deeply engaged with classical art, having sufficient direct expertise to draw comparisons between its different eras and – most importantly – to elaborate general principles to apply to his own art. In doing so he clearly draws on a long German intellectual tradition.<sup>61</sup> But this is by no means unique to Klinger; indeed it can be argued to be a broader characteristic of Symbolist classical receptions.

The *Choses d'art* ('Art Matters') section of the *Mercur de France* regularly covered exhibitions of ancient art considered to have some contemporary

literary or artistic relevance for readers. Edited by Aurier, this review section of the *Mercure* had the stated aim (1892: 282) of being the 'little gazette of the Art Nouveau'. One of the *Mercure*'s (1892: 92) reviews relayed the comments of the Belgian journal *Floréal* on an exhibition of Greek vases and Tanagra statuettes at the Cinquantenaire Palace in Brussels, comparing ancient and contemporary art as follows:

Splendid even in their very forms, cups enhanced by paintings overflowing with beauty and life. Unforgettable, these white *lekythoi* where the most elusive nuances are sung ... And the Tanagra! See, for example, the group called *Silenus and Nymph on a Couch*; where in contemporary art can something simultaneously more chaste and more voluptuous be found? These *Two Women on a Sarcophagus*, are these not all of love and grace?; the *Young Mother Giving Her Breast to Her Infant* – does she not do so with a unique gesture that reveals all the supreme and sweet joy of motherhood?; in the *Game of Ephredimos* – how harmonious and prompt is the movement? And the *Lyre Player Lying on a Rock*, does it not surpass the most beautiful conceptions of Mr. Burne Jones?

Such are these statuettes – notably the *Veiled Dancer*, the *Young Girl at the Column* and, above all, *Psyche on the Wings of a Butterfly* – that they have conserved in their folds the miraculous colours cherished by the artists of those days. How little, in truth, modern reproductions recall these faraway greens, and dying pinks!<sup>62</sup>

This passage reveals a number of things about the Symbolist interest in, and attitude towards, classical art. Firstly, it shows that the Symbolists were working in a wider intellectual context of significant interest in the art of the ancient world. But it also shows – in a similar way to Huysmans' passage about Des Esseintes' Latin library – that this interest had a new, more non-canonical slant to it. That is to say, a primacy was being placed on works of classical art either that showed some peculiarity of character (as per Klinger's interest in the idiosyncratic art of the later Roman empire), or which appealed to a particularly Symbolist aesthetic sensibility. We can see this in the author of the *Floréal* review's praise for the toned-down and faded colours that survived on Tanagra statuettes – we may think of Moreau's, Redon's and many other Symbolists' similar preference for the use of softer tones in their paintings. And alongside this is a pronounced interest in the subjects of Greek vase painting which

relate to the universal condition of humanity – including the erotic (where the *Silenus and Nymph* is mentioned first).

Particularly interesting, however, is the specific praise for ancient Greek funerary white-ground *lekythos* vases. As argued elsewhere (in the context of their impact on Art Nouveau artists),<sup>63</sup> the seriousness and nobility of their subject matter, often depicting the mourned heroic youth beside his funeral stele, as well as their typical lightness of composition and graceful use of line, gave them a strong appeal for many of the Symbolists' contemporaries. The reference to the 'elusive nuances' of these *lekythos* vases is very revealing of this dynamic; the appeal of such heroic themes, presented in a dreamlike fashion with one foot in this world and one in the next, is perhaps obvious when we consider the principal subjects of the works of artists such as Moreau and Redon, which similarly seek to bridge the divide between this world and another. In the chapters which follow, we will encounter many examples of where they and other artists turned to classical subject matter – some of which is of a very similar character to the funerary themes of *lekythos* vases – for inspiration in conjuring up a world beyond this world.

We have spoken above of how an overriding characteristic of Symbolist receptions of the classics is their very personal nature. The individuality of artists' receptions of the Greek body is often the result of a direct engagement with ancient sculpture. At least for the majority of those Symbolist artists working in Paris, this would have been very unproblematic, given the significant collections of Greek sculpture and plaster casts in the Louvre and other museums in Paris. Moreover, the works of Rodin, himself a collector of classical sculpture, had reinvigorated interest in its expressive potential, something reflected in many Symbolist works. We might take Rodin's sculpture *Danaïd*<sup>64</sup> (1889) as an example. Planned for his *The Gates of Hell* (1885) (but ultimately not included in the final version), the marble sculpture shows a female nude bent double in despair. Rodin depicts one of the daughters of Danaos from Greek myth, who had been made to fill a bottomless barrel with water as punishment for having slain their husbands on their wedding night. The artist depicts the moment at which one of the Danaïds realizes the utter fruitlessness of her unending task. Here, as in many other works, Rodin had explored the expressive potential of the nude in sculpture, employing a classical theme to do so. We might think of Rodin as in some ways demonstrating Symbolist

characteristics in the close interest he shows in the inner world. Yet the sheer mystic detachment of Symbolist painting often means it lacks the solidity and immediacy which so often predominate in that artist's work.

It would be a mistake to think, though, on the basis of this material detachment and lack of emphasis on solid form, that the Symbolists lacked any real engagement with classical sculpture. On the contrary, the American Symbolist Elihu Vedder (1836–1923) refers directly in his memoirs to time spent studying the great sculpture of antiquity. In his *Digressions*, Vedder (1910: 133), who studied in the atelier of the French painter François Picot (1786–1868), quotes the later letter of a friend reminiscing about a comic episode during which the student artists end up in a scuffle in the studio:

There is no need of my referring to Picot and Couture and our life in the studio in the rue Blanche; you must have all that pat. Perhaps you have forgotten Joe's Venus of Milo drawing and the skilful flitting of a palette full of paint across it by Jervais, and the interrupted battle that ensued . . . Joe's drawing may have been stained with paint, but my drawing of the Laocoon was stained with the blood of Cousin, and the fight was my fight.

Vedder's memoirs are generally of a light-hearted nature, but they are nonetheless interesting for how they capture a moment in the life of a group of contemporary art students, where studying from the same canonical Greek sculpture was such a standard part of their artistic education that it is almost the constant background to their lives. Many of the Symbolists would have had a similar experience as young men in the ateliers of the Neoclassical artists. Redon (1922: 22), for example, reminisces about how he enjoyed making copies of ancient sculpture in clay during his first training as an artist in Bordeaux:

I spent one year doing sculpture in Bordeaux, in the private workshop of a professor of the town. I came into contact there with this exquisite, soft and supple material that is clay, in attempting to make copies of antique pieces.<sup>65</sup>

Klinger's (1885: 49) understanding of ancient sculpture went far enough for him to have an appreciation of the role that colour played in its original form – relating to his wider theories about colour in art:

Throughout the great artistic epochs, colour has been the binding element of the three arts of architecture, painting and sculpture. Circumstances of the most different kinds have led to the loosening of that relationship and to its

ultimate dissolution. Turning back to the supposedly colourless sculpture of antiquity has been one reason.

In Klinger's interest in the polychrome nature of ancient Greek sculpture we detect a current of contemporary criticism of earlier Neoclassical receptions of ancient art. These went back to Winckelmann, who had argued that colour was irrelevant to beauty, and the consequent valorization in Weimar classicism of the apparent transcendence of colour in classical Greek sculpture.<sup>66</sup> This speaks to a much broader strain in Symbolism which was critical of Academic Neoclassicism, belying a strong sense that its receptions of the Greek body were in some way polluted or had robbed it of its original vitality. The same criticism was also frequently levelled more specifically at Academic interpretations of Greek myth. While the Symbolists criticized certain of their contemporaries for turning their backs on classicism altogether, they at the same time criticized their Neoclassical forebears for having lost touch with the true nature of the classical source. For the Symbolists, this was originally something inherently either vivacious (often in an erotic sense) or mysterious. Academic art had reduced both to nothing. Huysmans (Kotěra et al. 1900: 138–9) had bemoaned such flatly fantasist Neoclassical depictions of classical myth in an essay, 'Patriotism in Art', particularly lamenting the works of the Academic painters William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904):

It is true that if you want to paint only chimerical forms, such as centaurs and bacchantes and Nereids, you don't need to pay attention to anything in this world. But then you can, and you even ought, to place in the background a landscape made of painted paper and a stream made of glass. What meaning does a realistic frame for imaginary subjects have? Let's at least be logical: Boucher was logical with his theatrical landscapes, and his fine actresses dressed as Venus or Diana. Or, if you admit that nudity exists as a constant state, then paint me such nymphs in a real landscape as they would actually be, country girls sunburnt and scarred by the discomfort. Whoever goes about the woods and clearings without a veil doesn't have pale skin tinged with pink, and no lily and rose-coloured body.<sup>67</sup>

An essay in *La Plume* by the Belgian architect Frantz Jourdain (1847–1935), 'At the Medici Villa', summarizes well the broader rejection of Academic style by many artists at the time. Jourdain (Boës 1902: 67) laments the stultified quality

of the work of those Academic artists sent to study at the Villa Medici in Rome, submitted for the 'Concours de Rom' prize – his strongest criticism falling on the utter obsession with Greece and Rome:

Taxpayers are maintaining a 'School of Fine Arts' at great expense, where the instruction remains exclusively classical – that is to say, limited to the study of Greece and Italy. A School of Fine Arts with modern teaching such as the University enjoys doesn't exist, a so-called national school in which the marvellous and unique productions of France are derided or simply passed over in silence . . . The magnificent past of Assyria, Persia, Egypt, India, China or Japan is never brought up . . . And at the end of the year, the best productions of this artificial competition attempt the Concours de Rom. The subjects of the compositions are exclusively drawn from the Old and New Testaments, and from Greece and Rome . . . One is forbidden to behold, to study, to like, or to admire anything other than Greece and Italy.<sup>68</sup>

For Klinger (1885: 52–3), the primary crime of all of this repetitive History Painting was not its obsession with the classics per se, but how it had utterly obscured the centrality of the human, and the human figure, in art:

Allegories, costumes and flags, helmets and weapons – the so ridiculously sophisticated, and yet empty, historical and archaeological truths, which we believe to the point of naivety, are overwhelming any sound representation of what is really at the heart of all representation: man.<sup>69</sup>

Redon shared this dislike of Academicism, and of the Salons. The artist had trained under Gerôme and acquired a strong distaste for the constraints that were imposed on him during his artistic apprenticeship. Redon (1922: 23) summarized his experience of the Academic painter's atelier in no uncertain terms:

I was counting with the artistic formula by which I was supposed to be led, and forgot my own temperament too. I was tortured by the professor . . . He was visibly trying to inculcate me with his own way of seeing and to make of me a disciple – or to put me off art altogether.<sup>70</sup>

Redon's (1922: 34) initial dislike of his tutor appears to have then broadened into a more general complaint about the Salon system:

The official juries for painting officially recommend that you present *important* works to the Salon. What do they mean by that word? A work of



art is important by the measure of its dimensions, execution, choice of subject, sentiment, or by the thought behind it.<sup>71</sup>

Tellingly, however, for our purposes, his dislike of the Salons did not put the artist off the classics altogether (such as the passage from Jourdain's essay above might initially suggest). Rather Redon's (1922: 147–8) views of Academicism appear to have evolved into a criticism that it had misinterpreted the classics altogether:

Certainly the painters of a former era would have smiled had you told them that, one hundred years later, their works would be ridiculously old-fashioned – these plain nudes falsely imitated from the antique, while the newly discovered marbles had not yet allowed us to rediscover the first beauties. They would have smiled, and consciously so, if the helmets, tunics and all the antique accoutrements had been despised and put aside in favour of the simple expression of a sincerely impassioned soul, through which the love, the grace, the beauty itself, in all that she has of youth and of the divine, revealed antiquity itself in all that it had of the eternal eternal, love.<sup>72</sup>

In Redon we have a good summary of the educational trajectory, and artistic perspective towards antiquity, of many Symbolists: trained under an Academic painter, ultimately stifled by their limited interpretations of classical art, yet frustrated by their contemporaries' total rejection of it in favour of the material world, and instead seeking new life and the means to represent an inner world in the classics. Moreover, Redon's (1922: 130) attitude towards Academicism and its strictures closely reflected that of the literary Symbolists, as we see in his praise of Mallarmé's views on education:

My friend Stéphane Mallarmé, ever moved by a fine spirit of independence, desired the abolition of the lyceum, as much as that of the guillotine . . . To speak here only of the student painter at the Academy, I compare him to the seed that the sower has cast in the field to be fertilised at random by the plough that passes blindly over it, haphazardly cast either on auspicious earth or not. The plough is the rule, the school, the lyceum, the painting academy, the perhaps loveless and indifferent master, who comes at a fixed time and day because it is his job. In such state the student is far from the sweet and beneficial leisure, and the blessed hours, where intuition guides him.<sup>73</sup>

The Symbolists' (and other contemporary artistic movements') dislike of Academicism seems to have gone so far that for a time the term 'Academic' became a sort of insult in certain circles.<sup>74</sup> Writing in *La Plume*, the critic Tristan Legay (Boës 1902: 174) commented that:

The Academy became very unpopular, despite the election of Lamartine . . . One had turned the word 'Academician' into the most serious and most dishonouring insult. A man thus called was worthy of all disdain, indeed of every scourge . . . 'Day-by-day we were expecting a Saint Barthelemy of the classics,' Alexandre Dumas said.<sup>75</sup>

However, for all their dislike of the Academic painters, it is important to note that for the Symbolists there never was such a massacre of the classics (even if, figuratively speaking, there may have been for others of their contemporaries). The Symbolists retained a dream of Arcadia.<sup>76</sup> As late as 1908, the French Symbolist painter Alphonse Osbert (1857–1939) was still able to paint his strongly Puvis-esque *Evening in Antiquity* (1908),<sup>77</sup> which depicts a group of classically dressed and posed women at sunset, their backs turned to us, gazing out mournfully to sea. The Symbolists knew that the classical past, and its lost Arcadia, was becoming ever more distant by the day – but this only fired them the more to try and reach it through their art. Vedder (1910: 134) summed up this dynamic well in reminiscing about visiting Rome as a youth, and about 'long hours in the Colosseum by moonlight, and especially the twilight passed on the great piers of the Baths of Caracalla,' concluding – somewhat melancholically: 'But ever was this feeling – see all you can, for you will never see it again!'

In the chapters which follow we will see how for a brief time this Symbolist dream of antiquity – most powerfully expressed in its erotic reception of the Greek body – survived Academic Neoclassicism and was given new life. Following an initial chapter ('Sex and the Symbolists'), which provides an overview of Symbolist eroticism and sets the scene for Symbolist erotic receptions of the classics in greater depth, the rest of the book is divided into three parts, which consider respectively the female body, the male body and the other. Individual chapters consider the different receptions of each of these manifestations of the Greek body, and are subtitled accordingly. In Part One ('The Female Body'), we consider the female body as sexual object ('Aphrodite'), as sexual danger ('Medusa') and as sexual mystery ('Sphinx'). In Part Two ('The

Male Body'), we then examine how the male Greek body was transformed by the Symbolists, including as a sexual idol ('Endymion'), as a representation of unconscious sexual instinct ('Faun') and as homosexual or androgyne ('Ganymede'). Finally, in Part Three ('The Other'), we consider the Greek body in Symbolism at one remove, whether as animal or part-animal, distorted as monster, or else the body as distant or unattainable 'oriental'. It is intended thereby to cover the full variety of Symbolist erotic transformations of the Greek body, and the conclusion considers some of the general patterns which emerge. There is therefore no intention to cover Symbolist receptions of the classics exhaustively, given our particular interest in the erotic here, and a deliberate delimitation has been made for subject matter. Nor is every Symbolist artist discussed in this book; the Greek body was more important to some Symbolists than others, and a certain selectivity has therefore been applied. And finally, no assumption is made that the classics were the *only* inspiration for the Symbolists. The material covered in the chapters which follow therefore makes no claim to be a total representation of Symbolism's diverse panoply, but is rather a close look at but one particularly richly decorated plate.

## Notes

- 1 Odilon Redon, *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1912. Pastel, 84.4 × 65 cm (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris).
- 2 A few paragraphs in this book draw closely on or adapt in revised form passages from Warren (2017), given the frequent overlap between Symbolism and Art Nouveau. Conversely, certain material that is considered of closer relevance to Art Nouveau, or on account of its coverage in Warren (2017), has been deliberately excluded from the current study.
- 3 In this case, the Hellenistic *Aphrodite Anadyomene* ('Aphrodite Rising from the Ocean') (see discussion below).
- 4 No deliberate connotations are implied in use of Greek or Latin nomenclature of the classical pantheon in this book. The Greek form is preferred as a default, unless an artist has chosen otherwise.
- 5 Most notably, in Verhaeren's article, 'A Symbolist Painter', in the journal *L'Art Moderne* ('Modern Art'), in which the poet defined Symbolism in the arts in opposition to Naturalism. Verhaeren was a strong supporter of several Symbolist

artists, including Redon and Khnopff, the latter allegorizing this support in a drawing (Fernand Khnopff, *With Verhaeren. An Angel*, 1889. Ink, black chalk, graphite heightened with white and scratchings out on paper, 33 × 19.5 cm, private collection). See further Facos (2009).

- 6 'D'ailleurs, il faut le dire, et très haut, une des vertus du symbolisme naissant fut de ne pas se courber devant la puissance littéraire, devant les titres, les journaux ouverts, les amitiés de bonne marque, et de redresser les torts de la précédente generation.'
- 7 'L'union entre les symbolistes, outre un indéniable amour de l'art, et une tendresse commune pour les méconnus de l'heure précédente, était surtout faite par un ensemble de négations des habitudes antérieures. Se refuser à l'anecdote lyrique et romanesque, se refuser à écrire à ce va-comme-je-te-pousse, sous prétexte d'appropriation à l'ignorance du lecteur, rejeter l'art fermé des Parnassiens, le culte d'Hugo poussé au fétichisme, protester contre la platitude des petits naturalistes, retirer le roman du commérage et du document trop facile, renoncer à de petites analyses pour tenter des synthèses, tenir compte de l'apport étranger quand il était comme celui des grands Russes ou des Scandinaves, révélateur, tels étaient les points communs.'
- 8 See Thomson (2012) on the dominance of Naturalism and its association with Republicanism in France in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Symbolism's relationship with Naturalism, as that of many of the other 'modernisms' of the period, was complex and cannot be covered in detail here.
- 9 'En 1885, il y avait des décadents et des symbolistes, beaucoup de décadents et peu de symbolistes. Le mot de décadent avait été prononcé, celui de symboliste pas encore; nous parlions de symbole, nous n'avions pas créé le mot générique de symbolisme, et les décadents et les symbolistes c'était tout autre chose, alors. Le mot de décadent avait été créé par des journalistes, quelques-uns l'avaient, disaient-ils, ramassé comme les gueux de Hollande avaient arboré l'épithète injurieuse.'
- 10 Huysmans and Howard (2009: chapter 4).
- 11 'This idea of decadence continued to cling to the old errings. Baudelaire long spoke of a translation of Petronius which he never wrote, something which would have been an irremediable loss of a great and refined pleasure had not my dear friend, Laurent Tailhade, completed a translation of Petronius.' ('Cette idée de décadence, elle tenait encore à de vieux errements. Baudelaire avait longuement parlé d'une traduction de Pétrone qu'il n'écrivit pas, ce qui serait la perte irréparable d'un grand et raffiné plaisir d'art si mon cher ami, Laurent Tailhade, ne terminait une traduction de Pétrone.')
- 12 See Warren (2017: 122–7) on Art Nouveau and Symbolist artistic interpretations of this novel.

- 13 See Warren (2017: 119–21) on the Russian artist Bakst's reinvention of archaic Greek art in his costume designs for this ballet.
- 14 'Jean Moréas et Paul Adam . . . obtinrent l'insertion d'un manifeste littéraire quelque peu égoïste, où ils dépaignaient le mouvement symbolistes à leurs couleurs, en assumaient, de leur propre mandat, la tâche et tentaient de se constituer chefs d'école.'
- 15 See Warren (2017: 5).
- 16 We do not discuss Gustav Klimt in this book as a *Jugendstil* rather than Symbolist artist, even if his work also shows qualities of the latter.
- 17 'L'oeuvre d'art devra être:
1. *Idéiste*, puisque son idéal unique sera l'expression de l'Idée;
  2. *Symboliste*, puisqu'elle exprimera cette idée par des formes;
  3. *Synthétique*, puisqu'elle écrira ces formes, ces signes, selon un mode de compréhension générale;
  4. *Subjective*, puisque l'objet n'y sera jamais considéré en tant qu'objet, mais en tant que signe d'idée perçu par le sujet;
  5. (C'est une conséquence) *Décorative* – car la peinture décorative proprement dite, telle que l'ont comprise les Egyptiens, très probablement les Grecs et les Primitifs, n'est rien autre chose qu'une manifestation d'art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste.'
- 18 Plato, *Symposium* 189–93.
- 19 Plato, *Symposium* 201–4.
- 20 'Une égale ardeur de Beauté et d'Art personnel nous a ici rassemblés, donc causons. O mes amis, la république nous tolère, nous artistes, parce que notre rêve célèbre et ennoblit ses réjouissances. Eh bien! L'heure n'a-t-elle point sonné de lui montrer enfin que nous sommes un peu plus que ses valets, et que nous savons, quand nous le voulons, constituer un foyer d'art qui départit à ses membres une sanction d'une valeur plus haute que l'approbation mercantile offerte par le don des ses prix et de ses médailles? Que nous pouvons créer une école, une cour judicieuse, où l'art se boirait en paroles, où l'artiste se délecterait aux émotions, se tremperait aux évocations supérieures que le raffinement et la fantaisie des causeurs fait éclore? Assez longtemps nous avons travaillé en silence, assez longtemps nous nous sommes épuisés au sein d'un individuel labeur! Tel qui inaugure aujourd'hui, avec faste, un collège d'esthétique, et intronise les dieux nouveaux de la musique et de la poésie, sur nous ne prélève point de droits de parrainage. Affirmons nos pensées. Marions-les ou dépareillons-les. Affinons-les. Ne serait-ce point une chose recommandable, excellente, parfaite, que de les traduire en un verbe facétieux, pour notre particulier plaisir? Ces mirages de la

Cité ou de la Montagne ou de l'Onde que nous portons en nos rêves, que nous soumettons au laborieux enfantement de notre esprit, à l'exiguïté d'un canon selon quoi se forme son espèce, combien ne gagneraient-ils point à être négociés en commun, à être éclaircis par chacun! . . . Ce n'est point qu'on doive constituer un groupe à part, isolé dans la grande lutte contemporaine pour le triomphe de la raison, non, je ne dis pas cela. Mais ce que l'on doit faire, c'est s'efforcer d'assembler les affinités artistes qui s'ignorent et les mettre en relations, pour leur plus grand bien. Est-il rien d'aussi élevé, suggestif et sobre qu'une musique parfaite? Nos entretiens deviseraient de la beauté qui émane des musiques parfaites. Une attitude familière et simple conviendrait aux convives, sans morgue, plaisante, savoureuse et polie. Et ce serait un nouveau symposion, plus intime et moins pompeux que l'antique.'

21 See Billings (2017).

22 'Evropský svět vykazuje dosud tři takové vrcholy tragedie, neboť tři byly světové krise, jež prodělal. O kořist první rozdelili se Aischyl se Sofoklem. Čest druhé, čest býti mluvčím člověka, který se vynořil z mlh a pout křesťanského středověku nah, divoký, krásný, radostný, volný a krutý, člověk vášně, ale hlavně člověk sebe, svých instinktů, svých pudů, své vůle a své zhouby v nadměrnosti svého života, připadla anglickému člověku Shakespearovi. Lví podíl třetí doby jest bez odporu Ibsenův.'

23 František Bílek, *Allegory of Our Age*, 1895, gypsum (Prague City Gallery, Prague).

24 'Le gout de l'exquis est naturel aux artistes. Et parmi les poètes de sa génération, je n'en vois point qui soient plus artistes que Laurent Tailhade. Il l'est dans sa vie extérieure et dans sa vie intérieure, dans les moindres mouvements de sa personne et de sa pensée. Mais à ce passionné des Formes et des Couleurs la surnaturelle beauté de l'âme chrétienne ne pouvait suffire. Aussi, voyons-nous tout de suite se tourner vers les sensualités artistiques et religieuses du paganisme; c'est à la Grèce qu'il demande une esthétique et une foi. Oui, Laurent Tailhade est un païen, un païen par tempérament de poète et par préférences de philosophe, un païen, sans doute, qui a dans les veines du sang chrétien et que l'Eglise alors attire et irrite tout ensemble, qui la hait dans ses dogmes, dans ses mystères, dans sa discipline, qui l'aime dans ces cérémonies, dans son art, dans les tendresses de sa morale, dans sa liturgie, jusque dans ses vocables, d'une si expressive et si effrayante precision.'

25 'On touží po onom umění Výrazu, jakým bylo umění velké doby křesťanské: umění klidné vznešené, synthesesou nejvyšších snah lidského ducha, jež je modlitbou. A naše doba, je neklidná, hledavá, kosmpolitická a historická, její přednosti nesou v sobě zárodky smrti. Jdeme však vstříc době Nové.'

26 'La grande émotion est à l'heure de ma première Communion, sous les voûtes de l'église Saint-Seurin; les chants m'exaltent; ils sont vraiment ma première révélation de l'art.'

- 27 'Regretterai-je la Grèce et son harmonie, Rome et sa force, le Moyen-Age et son mystère, la Renaissance et sa passion quand j'ai la vie moderne et son âme? ... Artistes, ne soyons pas ennemis de notre temps.'
- 28 'Dans les arts plastiques, il goûtait la vision sereine de la Grèce autant que le rêve expressif du moyen âge ... Je dois donc aux entretiens de cet ami, d'une intelligence si lucide, les premiers exercices de mon esprit et de mon goût.'
- 29 'Il y avait certainement une curiosité vers des époques qu'on disait faisandées, encore que leur logique d'être eut été depuis longtemps démontrée par Amédée Thierry; les recherches de Fustel n'étant pas sans écho, la petite pièce latine des *Fleurs du Mal* portait ses fruits; de divers côtés on préparait des anthologies des pièces de basse latinité; ce fut plus tard M. de Gourmont qui réalisa, pour sa part, ces projets antérieurs que sans doute il ignora. Il y avait aussi l'idée que les Prussiens de 70 avaient été les barbares, que Paris c'était Rome ou Byzance; les romans de Zola, *Nana*, avaient souligné la métaphore.'
- 30 'Les épopées sont les grands monuments de l'humanité: les oeuvres purement littéraires disent beaucoup moins; la traduction déjà leur enlève quelque part de leur beauté.'
- 31 For example in Rops (1912: 69).
- 32 'Lui qui avait traversé les littératures en plaisantin, s'émut au contact de ce prêtre fervent des Muses, qui va sur terre indifférent à tout ce qui n'est pas divin ... Il travailla, non plus au hasard de ses stations dans la fumée des cabarets, mais dans l'ombre des bibliothèques, avec régularité et méthode. Il se fit traduire Homère, Sophocle. Il réapprit les textes de Virgile. On le rencontrait, la nuit, au bras de Moréas, buvant la parole attique ... il démêla tout de suite ce qu'il y avait de spécial dans cet esprit encore mêlé aux ondes impures d'un prétendu symbolisme.'
- 33 'À l'heure où éclata le manifeste du *Figaro*, les symbolistes et les décadents se disputaient l'attention. Si dissemblables qu'ils parussent, les uns et les autres étaient le produit d'une erreur commune: le Romantisme. Les décadents avaient pris aux romantiques le sens exagéré de la couleur; ils en étaient tombés au *japonisme*, au *tachisme*, à l'*audition colorée*. Les symbolistes avaient hérité du goût des romantiques pour le macabre et le nébuleux. Ils pataugaient dans une incohérence barbare qui voulait être du rêve. Conduits par un abus de basses analogies qu'ils décoraient du nom pompeux du symbolisme, ils en étaient venus à traduire en un patois grossier des hallucinations alcooliques ou artificiels que Baudelaire avaient du moins promues à la solennité d'un style académique.'
- 34 'Italien ist ein Land, das man sehen und an dem man sein Wohlgefallen haben, in dem man sich aber hüten soll, Inspirationen zu suchen. Sind sie retrospektiver Art, so sind sie gefährlich, sind sie aus dem aktuellen Italien, so sind sie banal und haben nicht diesen Akzent, den London und Paris so erschreckend und günstig

für die psychologische Kunst haben, die einzig wahre moderne Kunst. Die heutige italienische Kunst leistet nichts. Alle hängen sie an den Schössen Fortunys, eines Spaniers. – Die Bauten auf Korsika, ja, aber das ist nicht modern, das ist aus andern Jahrhunderten. Italien ist ein Land, in dem man sich des Klimas erfreuen soll, der plastischen Schönheit der Mädchen und der vergangenen grossen Künste.’ See also Rops (1912: 44) on his journey to Sicily and Tunisia.

35 Most notably in Winckelmann (1764).

36 Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, original fourth century BC. Shown in Figure 2 in a late Hellenistic variant copy in the Metropolitan Museum: ‘Bronze statuette of Aphrodite, c. 150–100 BC. Bronze, h. 51.7 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

37 An originally Hellenistic sculpture of the third or second century BC known in several Roman marble copies.

38 *Aphrodite Anadyomene* (‘Aphrodite Rising from the Ocean’), late second century BC. Marble statuette, h. 54.6 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). The same composition is known in several sculptures from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, all of which indicate that one of Aphrodite’s arms was originally raised. Pliny (*Natural History* 35.91) also describes the Greek painter Apelles’ (330–320 BC) treatment of the same subject (now lost), which inspired Titian among others (Titian, *Venus Anadyomene*, c. 1520. Oil on canvas, 75.8 × 57.6 cm, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh).

39 *Venus of Milo*, c. 150 BC. Marble sculpture (Louvre, Paris).

40 For a detailed reception history of the *Venus of Milo*, see Prettejohn (2006).

41 Praxiteles, *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus*, c. 350–330 BC. Marble sculpture, h. 215 cm (Archaeological Museum, Olympia). Possibly a Hellenistic copy of the original. Attribution to artist contested.

42 ‘Marble torso of Eros’, first/second century AD. Marble, h. 77.8 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Roman adaptation after Praxiteles, *Hermes Sauroktonos* (‘Hermes the Lizard-Slayer’), c. 370–340 BC, likely bronze sculpture.

43 *Belvedere Hermes*, c. 117–138 AD. Coarse-grained white marble, h. 195 cm (Vatican Museums, Rome). Originally known as the *Belvedere Antinous*, it was likely inspired by Greek bronze originals of Praxiteles’ school.

44 *Apollo Belvedere*, c. mid-second century AD. Marble sculpture (Vatican Museums, Rome). Possibly a copy of a Greek bronze original by Leochares of 330–320 BC, but attribution uncertain.

45 Hellenistic sculpture (e.g. the ‘Laocoon’ marble of the first century BC), while less explicitly referenced in Symbolism, would also have formed part of artists’ Academic instruction.

46 See also my summary in Warren (2017).



- 47 A (by no means exhaustive) list of other recent German publications from this research group of interest to this study would include Harbsmeier et al. (2009), Kitzblicher, Lubitz and Mindt (2009), Arweiler and Möller (2008), Heinze, Möckel and Röcke (2014), Bredekamp (2017) and Helmrich, Hausteiner and Jenson (2017).
- 48 Prettejohn has for example looked at classical reception by the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, including Frederic Leighton (Barringer and Prettejohn 1999). Jenkyns (1984) and, more recently, Goldhill (2011) and Stray (2018) have also considered the Victorians' relationship with classical antiquity, and Martindale, Evangelista and Prettejohn (2017) have explored the seminal role played by the English essayist and humanist Walter Pater (1839–94) in the classicism of Victorian aestheticism.
- 49 'Uvádím tu za příklad náš ideál v řeckém umění. Když do něho vniknu a je chápnu, tedy vidím, že příčina, proč toto umění se mi zdá býti ideálem, není v jeho formě, nýbrž v pravdivosti, s kterou tvořilo, a právě tou se dotýká mého snažení. Umění, kterým Řek přiměřeně účelu a poloze (podnebí) vyjádřil svou formou dokonale konstruktivní tvoření prostoru – o toto umění usilujeme my moderní lidé, totiž: chceme svou formou právě tak dokonale své konstruktivní tvoření prostoru vyjádřiti. Forma antiky absolutně vzata, nemůže nám býti ideálem-cílem. – Ideál, který leží pro nás v nějakém umění, může býti právě jen relativní.'
- 50 See Warren (2017: 57–60) for a discussion of Phidias' *Athena Parthenos* in Art Nouveau. Phidias' sculpture was less of a direct influence for the Symbolists, but they would have been familiar with Roman marble copies of his work from their Academic education.
- 51 'Moi, j'allais, rêvant du divin Platon  
Et de Phidias,  
Et de Salamine et de Marathon,  
Sous l'œil clignotant des bleus becs de gaz.'
- 52 'grandes époques, lorsqu'une civilisation librement épanouie peut alors tenter de s'élever sans obstacle vers la vérité. Exemple: Phidias, Léonard da Vinci, types sacrés qui ont élevé l'art à des hauteurs plastiques inaccessibles, peut-être à jamais perdues et vers lesquels les plus grands esprits se tourment sans cesse pour aimer, prier et se recueillir.'
- 53 'Betrachten wir die Werke der besten Meister, so finden wir, besonders bei der Antike, schlagende Beweise für das Gesagte. Sie waren Meister des Gewandes, weil sie Meister der Körperformen waren. Wie haben sie nun das Gewand im Verhältnis zum Körper behandelt? Ihre grossartigen Schöpfungen tragen fast alle Gewänder oder Gewandstücke: Harmodios und Aristogeiton, eine Anzahl der Niobiden, Laokoon, die Venus von Milo, der Apoll vom Belvedere und Iphigenie

mit Orest in Neapel, um nur einige anzuführen. Wie tragen diese nun das Gewand? Es lässt absichtlich den Torso unbedeckt. Die Entwicklung seiner Formen entweder von der einen Schulter zu den Knien, oder des ganzen Oberkörpers von der Mitte der Oberschenkel ab, zeigt frei die ganze Körperschönheit. Das Gewand bedeckt nur solche Teile, die am Körper gedoppelt sind, so dass die so wichtigsten Konstruktionspunkte dem Beschauer keinen Zweifel über die Bewegung und Lösung der Körperentwicklung lassen.'

- 54 'Leider müssen wir uns gestehen, dass in allen heutigen Kunstrichtungen die Darstellung des menschlichen Körpers in den Hintergrund tritt, dass über Novellistik, über die historische, die archäologische Zuthat und die sogenannten sozialen Tendenzen jene Forderung selbst vernachlässigt wird . . . Aber man hat nur totes Material, verlebte Stile, sei es Renaissance oder Griechentum, wider herbeigeht . . . Man überblicke die Stilarten aller Zeit und man wird ohne Weiteres erkennen, dass jede selbstbewusst auftretende Kunstepoche den menschlichen Körper auf ihre Weise aufzufassen und zu bilden wusste. Ägypter oder Griechen, Japanese oder Renaissancekünstler, jeder hat die einfache menschliche Form, die sich doch seit Jahrtausenden gleichgeblieben ist.'
- 55 'In der Weise, wie wir heute zu arbeiten genötigt sind, hält sich die schlechte Berninische Körperauffassung, in der die neuesten heutigen Künstler tief aber unbewusst stecken, oder lässt sie nicht über eine flache und falsche Antikisierung nach schlechten Mustern hinauskommen.'
- 56 'Es bedurfte noch der grossen Revolution, des falschen Griechentums und der in seinem Sinne farblos antikisierenden neuen Kunst, um die Zersetzung der Gesamtkunst gründlich zu vollenden.'
- 57 'Uns wird von Jugend auf die Grösse und Schönheit der antiken und mittelalterlichen Kunst als Ideal hingestellt, wir bewundern in Deutschland glücklicherweise auch unverstümmelt in unseren Museen ihre Werke, dennoch wird durch die Scheu vor der Darstellung und Ausstellung des Nackten in unseren Werken das energische Studium völlig lahm gelegt. Wir werden durch Erziehung und Vorbilder zugleich auf ein grosses Ziel gewiesen und in der Praxis des Berufs davon zurückgehalten. Entweder sind die gerühmten Meister falsche Ideale, oder wir sind nicht reif genug ihre Schüler zu sein. Nur die Möglichkeit, das ganz und gross Gefühlte auch voll äussern zu können, bewegt uns zum Studium, zur Ausführung. Was ich dem Publikum nicht zeigen darf hätte ich sonst keinen Grund zu leisten.'
- 58 'Le peintre n'est pas intellectuel lorsque, ayant peint une femme nue, elle nous laisse dans l'esprit l'idée qu'elle va se réhabiller de suite. Le peintre intellectuel nous la montre dans une nudité qui nous rassure, parce qu'elle ne la cache pas; elle la laisse ainsi, sans honte, dans un éden, pour des regards qui ne sont pas les nôtres,

mais ceux d'un monde cérébral, un monde imaginaire créé par le peintre, où se meut et s'épand la beauté qui jamais n'engendra l'impudeur, mais défère au contraire à toute la nudité un attrait pur qui ne nous abaisse pas. Les femmes nues de Puvis de Chavannes ne se réhabillent point, ainsi que beaucoup d'autres dans le passé, au gynécée charmant d'un Giorgione, d'un Corrège. Il en est une, dans le *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* de Manet, qui se hâtera de se revêtir après l'ennui de son malaise sur l'herbe froide, auprès des messieurs sans idéal qui l'entourent et lui causent. Que disent-ils? Rien de beau, je soupçonne. Quant à ne peindre que des substances, même très bien, avec virtuosité, on en goûtera le plaisir, tout autant à peindre la robe que ce qu'elle cache. Peindre une étoffe, des étoffes, comme c'est plus franc et purement décisif que nous représenter le nu pour le nu, c'est-à-dire quelque chose de l'être humain sans aucun héroïsme.'

- 59 'Konturen und Kompositionen allerdings, die sich in den Händen der griechischen und etruskischen Vasenmaler zu wunderbarstem Rythmus und Liebreiz erhoben.'
- 60 'Die Vasenbilder der Griechen und der Etrusker – jener höchsten Meister der Kontur – bilden einen Beleg für die Trennung der Ästhetik in Zeichnung und Plastik, denn wenig genug existiert an Malereien. Jedenfalls finden wir nur an Bildwerken der spätesten romanischen Epoche Vergleiche mit jenen Kompositionen auf Gefässen. Die fratzenhaften Körperumbildungen, derbsinnlichen Ungeheuerlichkeiten und die ausgesprochene Vorliebe für stärkste Bewegungen stehen in mehrwürdigem Kontrast zu der wunderbaren Geschlossenheit und Ruhe der gleichzeitigen Bildwerke. Es ist auch nicht einzuwenden, dass es sich hier um Handwerkserzeugnisse handle. Bei aller Skizzenhaftigkeit sind diese Arbeiten Kunstwerke im beste Sinne. Ich sehe in ihnen eine Äusserung des antiken Genius, der verschiedene Materiale mit dem diesen innewohnenden verschiedenen, zweck- und sinnentsprechendem Geiste behandelte. Dort für grosse Zwecke, grosse Formen und eine nie fehlgreifende Durchbildung der Erscheinung, hier im kleineren Leben Fülle von Sinnlichkeit, Witz und Lebensbehangen in der knappestn Formandeutung der Kontur.'
- 61 Klinger's theoretical approach to Greek art can be contextualized by that of earlier German philologist and archaeologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858). In Creuzer (1810), which was highly influential in the German-speaking world, he had attributed to Greek mythology a revelatory quality with origins in eastern mythology.
- 62 'Splendides par leurs formes mêmes, les coupes que rehaussent des peintures débordantes de beauté et de vie! Inoubliables, ces lécythes blancs où chantent les plus fuyantes nuances . . . Et les Tanagra! Voyez, par exemple, le groupe intitulé *Silène et nymphe sur une kliné*; où trouver dans l'art contemporaine quelque chose d'à la fois plus chaste et plus voluptueux? Ces *Deux jeunes femmes sur un*

*sarcophage* ne sont-elles tout l'amour et toute la grâce; la *Jeune mère montrant le sein à son enfant* ne le-fait elle avec un geste unique découvrant tout le suprême et doux bonheur de la maternité; dans le *Jeu de l'ephedismos* – comme le mouvement est harmonieux et prompt! Et la *Joueuse de lyre couchée sur un rocher* ne surpasse-t-elle les plus belles conceptions de M. Burne Jones?/Telles ces statuettes – notamment la *Danseuse voilée*, la *Jeune fille à la colonne* et surtout une *Psyché aux ailes de papillon*, ont conservé dans leurs plis les miraculeuses couleurs que choyaient les artistes d'alors. Combien peu, vraiment, les reproductions modernes rapellent ces verts lointains et ces roses mourants!

63 See Warren (2017: 47–8).

64 Auguste Rodin, *Danaïd*, 1889. Marble sculpture, h. 36 cm, w. 71 cm, d. 53 cm (Musée Rodin, Paris).

65 'J'ai fait de la sculpture durant une année à Bordeaux, dans l'atelier particulier du professeur de la ville. J'ai touché là cette matière exquise, douce et souple qu'est la terre glaise, en m'essayant à des copies de morceaux antiques.'

66 See Purdy (2004).

67 'Je pravda, že chcete-li malovat pouze tvory chimerické, jako kentaury, pak bachantky a nereidky, nemusíte pozorovat nic na světě. Pak ale můžete, a dokonce byste měli dáti do pozadí krajinu z malovaného papíru a potůček z předemného skla. Jaký má smysl reálný rám pro smyšlené sužety? Budme aspoň logičti; Boucher byl logický se svými divadelními krajinami a se svými fešnými herečkami převlečenými za Venuše a Diany. Anebo připustíte-li, že nahota exituje jako stav stálý, pak mi namalujte ve skutečné krajině nymfy takové, jaké by musily býti, venkovská děvčata opalená a osmahlá sluncem i nepohodou. Kdo se prochází bez závoje po lesích a po mýtinách, nemá pleť bledou a slabě narůžovělou, nemá tělo uhněteno z lilí a růží.' (Translation from the original French in *Volné Směry*.)

68 'Les contribuables entretiennent à grands frais une Ecole des Beaux-Arts où l'enseignement reste exclusivement classique, c'est à dire limité à l'étude de la Grèce et de l'Italie, une Ecole des Beaux-Arts où l'enseignement moderne dont jouit l'Université n'existe pas, une Ecole dite nationale où les merveilleuses et uniques productions de la France sont tournées en dérision ou simplement passées sous silence . . . Jamais on n'évoque le fastueux passé de l'Assyrie, de la Perse, de l'Egypte, de l'Inde, de la Chine ni du Japon . . . A la fin de l'année, les meilleurs produits de cette controverse artificielle tentent le concours de Rom. Les sujets des compositions sont tirés exclusivement du nouveau et de l'ancien Testament, des histoires Grecque et Romaine . . . Défence de regarder, d'étudier, d'aimer, d'admirer autre chose que la Grèce et l'Italie.'

69 'Allegorien, Kostüme und Fahnen, Helme und Waffen, die so lächerlich anspruchsvolle und doch leere historische und archäologische Treue, an die wir

bis zur Naivetät glauben, verschwemmen jede gesunde Darstellung von dem, was doch den Kernpunkt aller Darstellung ausmacht: dem Menschen.’

- 70 ‘Je comptais sans la formule d’art qui devait me conduire, et j’oubliais aussi mon propre tempérament. Je fus torturé par le professeur . . . il cherchait visiblement à m’inculquer sa propre manière de voir et à faire un disciple – ou à me dégoûter de l’art même.’
- 71 ‘Les jurés officiels de peinture vous recommandent officieusement de présenter au Salon des oeuvres *importantes*. Qu’entendent-ils par ce mot-là? Un ouvrage d’art est important par la dimension, l’exécution, le choix du sujet, le sentiment, ou par la pensée.’
- 72 ‘Certes les peintres officiels d’alors auraient singulièrement souri si l’on était venu leur dire que, cent ans plus tard, leurs oeuvres seraient ridiculement démodées, ces plates nudités imitées faussement de l’antique, alors que les marbres nouvellement découverts, n’avaient pas encore permis d’en découvrir les beautés premières. Ils auraient souri, et consciemment, si les casques, les tuniques, tout l’appareil antique eût été méprisé, écarté, pour leur préférer la simple expression d’une âme sincèrement passionnée par qui l’amour, la grâce, la beauté elle-même, dans ce qu’elle a de jeune et de divin, révélaient l’antiquité elle-même en ce qu’elle avait d’éternel l’éternel, l’amour.’
- 73 ‘Mon ami Stéphane Mallarmé, toujours mu par un esprit de belle indépendance, désirait l’abolition du lycée, autant que celle de la guillotine . . . Pour ne parler ici que de l’élève peintre à l’académie, je le compare à la graine que le semeur a jetée dans le champ pour être mise en fécondation à tout hasard par la charrue qui passera aveuglément sur elle, jetant de la terre propice ou non, au petit bonheur. La charrue, c’est la règle, le lycée, l’académie de peinture, le maître sans amour peut-être et indifférent, qui vient à heure et jour fixes, puisqu’il fonctionne. L’élève est là bien loin du doux et bienfaisant loisir, et des heures bénies où l’intuition le guidera.’
- 74 See for example Vedder (1910: 129).
- 75 ‘L’Académie devint très impopulaire, malgré l’élection de Lamartine . . . On fit du mot *académicien* l’insulte la plus grave, la plus déshonorante. Un homme appelé ainsi était digne de tous les mépris, de tous les supplices mêmes . . . “On s’attendait de jour en jour”, dit Alexandre Dumas, “à une Saint-Barthélemy de classiques”’
- 76 A region of the Peloponnese in Greece, abstracted and idealized by classical (for example, Theocritus and Virgil), as well as Renaissance, poets as a bucolic paradise. The concept persisted for the Symbolist poets, for whom it often connoted classical antiquity more generally, and it is used in this sense throughout this book.
- 77 Alphonse Osbert, *Evening in Antiquity*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 150.5 × 135.5 cm (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris).



## Sex and the Symbolists

In his novel *Against the Grain*, Huysmans had described his protagonist Des Esseintes' encounter with Moreau's painting *Salome*<sup>1</sup> (1876) (Figure 6), which he had acquired for his own delectation:

Her face is meditative, solemn, almost august, as she commences the lascivious dance that will awaken the slumbering senses of old Herod. Diamonds scintillate against her glistening skin. Her bracelets, her girdles, her rings flash. On her triumphal robe, seamed with pearls, flowered with silver and laminated with gold, the breastplate of jewels, each link of which is a precious stone, flashes serpents of fire against the pallid flesh, delicate as a tea-rose: its jewels like splendid insects with dazzling elytra, veined with carmine, dotted with yellow gold, diapered with blue steel, speckled with peacock green.

In Gustave Moreau's work, conceived independently of the Testament themes, Des Esseintes at last saw realized the superhuman and exotic Salome of his dreams. She was no longer the mere performer who wrests a cry of desire and of passion from an old man by a perverted twisting of her loins; who destroys the energy and breaks the will of a king by trembling breasts and quivering belly. She became, in a sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, of accursed Beauty, distinguished from all others by the catalepsy which stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, baneful, like the Helen of antiquity, fatal to all who approach her, all who behold her, all whom she touches.<sup>2</sup>

For Des Esseintes, the painting is a revelation. The Symbolist artist Moreau has breathed new life back into the biblical story of King Herod and Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils' (which she will subsequently use – in answer to Herod's rash wish that she might have anything she desires – to demand the



**Figure 6** Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*. Courtesy Getty – SuperStock.

head of John the Baptist, her unrequited love). Huysmans' description of Moreau's Salome perfectly captures the Symbolist fascination with the erotic. Her sexuality is mysterious, overpowering, demonic and inherently tragic. There is something inevitable about the doom the eroticism of Salome embodies. Huysmans knows this. Yet his tone is not moralizing. Instead, her tragic sexuality is a sort of epiphany: a non-Christian epiphany that, while demonic in nature, is nonetheless fascinating.

The Symbolists revelled in that fascination. And the artists of the movement looked far and wide for symbols to represent it on canvas. Moreau had found its perfect icon in Salome, and Huysmans aptly captured her grip on the imagination of his generation of writers and artists. Salome is the ultimate *femme fatale*, demonstrating the inevitability of the power of irrational



sexuality, whose force is such that it even leads to the demise of a saint. Moreau might just as well have chosen a classical rather than a biblical model – Huysmans' comparison of her to the Homeric Helen of Troy in the excerpted passage is telling in this respect – but the essential traits that Moreau found in Salome summarize well what the Symbolists found in classical models more generally. It is no exaggeration to say that the Symbolists were obsessed with the tyrannical power of sex, particularly over man (although, as we will see, this was not exclusive), and the defencelessness of reason before instinct. They mined Greek myth for examples that demonstrated this inevitable truth. Yet the Symbolists did not find in that truth cause for despair; they rather gloried in it.<sup>3</sup>

The Belgian illustrator Rops (1912: 59–60), whose works we reference throughout this book, compared the love of woman to the Greek myth of Pandora's box: 'The love of women, like Pandora's box, contains all the pain of life – but they are shrouded in golden leaves, and are so full of colours and scents, that one must never complain of having opened the box.' Rops' metaphor betrays the essentially aesthetic concern of the Symbolists with the erotic. There is no denial of its irrationality, but at the same time they take great pleasure in its beauty. As Salome herself, sexuality is at once terrible and beautiful. Huysmans (1908: 98), who was also fascinated by Rops' work and the women he portrayed, elsewhere discussed the artist's essential concerns in an analysis of his work:

Whether we accept or reject the theory, doesn't it apply just as much today? Isn't man induced to crimes and misdemeanours by woman who is, herself, almost always lost by her fellow man? In sum, she is the great vessel of iniquities and crimes, the mass of misery and shame, the true introducer of those embassies legated to our souls by every vice.<sup>4</sup>

In Greek myth and art the Symbolists found a perfect, unmitigated, expression of this truth. Yet before we jump to a consideration of the many ways in which Symbolist artists transformed Greek myth, we need to turn to an artist who straddles the border between Academicism and Symbolism proper, and whose work had a seminal impact on a majority of Symbolists.

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), conventionally thought of as an exponent of Symbolism, was a French painter who became known for his

allegorical subjects of a Neoclassical nature. He was best-known for his large murals showing statuesque women in springtime landscapes. Yet Puvis also gained renown among his contemporaries for the manner in which he pushed the boundaries of such allegories, both in style and composition, and in subject matter (his *The Poor Fisherman*<sup>5</sup> being a case in point). Many of his works began to take on a pronounced Symbolist quality, and yet – given his retention of ‘traditional’ subject matter in his works, and his close ties to the art establishment – he had the latitude to be something of a pioneer in this direction, while escaping the ire of the official Salon juries. Puvis’ various works on classicizing subjects demonstrate the starting point for many Symbolists in engaging with Greek myth and art, a majority of whom would have received a standard Academic training. As a result, several had a vague – at times confused – association between the classics and the erotic, which they largely inherited from Neoclassicism. For classical subjects had long been one of the few categories in which it was acceptable to depict the nude directly – at least until Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*<sup>6</sup> broke this convention. This strong association between the classics and the nude was complemented by the literary education that many artists received, where the love and mythological poetry of Ovid and other classical authors were standard elements of school curricula.

Puvis’ works show how the Symbolist reception of the Greek body essentially grew out of its antecedent Academic reception. Puvis also illustrates that the Symbolist reception of classical art – mirroring that of the movement’s literary incarnation – is essentially something that began in France (although, as we shall see, it quickly spread much wider than this). Arguably one of Puvis’ most iconic works, *Young Girls at the Seaside*<sup>7</sup> (1879) (Figure 7), captures well the artist’s conception of the Greek body. In this painting, Puvis poses three semi-naked adolescent female figures beside the sea. A central figure stands facing away from the observer, her statuesque and marble-pale back turned towards us as she gazes out at the ocean, holding her long red hair out to her side. At either side of her feet two further figures recline, likely the same woman. To the left of the painting, one of these figures faces towards the observer, leant against a rock, her long red hair falling behind her as she looks down mournfully. To her right a further figure reclines, her back turned towards us as she looks into the distance. White flowers and grass sprout out of the sandy rock around



**Figure 7** Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Young Girls at the Seaside*. Courtesy Getty – photo Josse/Leemage/Contributor.

them, against the backdrop of a deep blue sea and nascent sunset. The painting, exhibited first by Puvis in the Salon de la Société des artistes français (Salon of the Society of French Artists) in 1879 and subsequently in an exhibition organized by the French art collector Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922) in 1887, had a great impact on both his immediate contemporaries and later artists – directly inspiring both Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).<sup>8</sup>

Various meanings have been attributed to Puvis' three mysterious women – a debate intensified by Matisse's later reuse of them in his *Luxury*<sup>9</sup> (1904). Gibson (2006: 56) has, for example, discussed whether the three figures are purely compositional, or in fact represent the different human states of passivity, activity and contemplation. However we interpret the exact meaning of the work, it is a good summary of the Symbolists' starting point in their reception

of the Greek body: physically statuesque, with the appearance of marble, yet melancholic, and with a soulful detachment from this world that suggests their belonging to another. Their situation by the sea, a metaphor for the soul, is also significant – an iconography recurrent in Symbolist art, including in its classical allegories. Puvis' works were, however, not only of a melancholic nature, even if this appears to have become the prominent characteristic of his work over time as its Symbolist character intensified. His earlier painting *Summer*<sup>10</sup> (1873) (exhibited in the 1873 Salon), which predictably – given its subject – is of a more optimistic nature, nonetheless presents the same type of statuesque and ethereal woman as in his *Young Girls at the Seaside*. In the painting Puvis depicts an unspecified ancient theme, likely a classical setting given the clothing of its figures, in which a number of similarly semi-nude figures take in the harvest. In the foreground of the painting, women and children take shelter from the harsh sunshine in the woodland shade, some of them playing with lambs. The scene is an idyll in Puvis' trademark style.

Classical reference in these paintings is not specific, but elsewhere it is more so. Most notably, his *Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and the Muses*<sup>11</sup> (1884/89) is a good example of the artist's indebtedness to classical art. In an idyllic twilight summer landscape, featuring a lake, classical columns and mountains in the distance, several young women representing the classical Muses – some wearing the *stola* (a type of women's tunic) and others half-naked – stand or recline in groups amid the flowers. They are accompanied by nude young boys and two angels, one of whom strums on a harp, flying over the scene. The painting can be considered a tribute by Puvis to his classical inspirations – and, when so considered, it is easy to understand why the artist's work retained its appeal to the Salon juries. It reflects a larger-scale mural of similar composition that the artist had completed in 1883 for the Museum of Fine Arts of his native Lyons, part of a series of murals for the museum of which this was the first. Intended for the museum entrance, its subject of the Muses was deliberately chosen to welcome visitors. Although executed in oil, the painting imitates the quality of the fresco technique of the original mural. Puvis doubtless drew on multiple sources for this work, including Renaissance models (the painting is strongly reminiscent of certain of Botticelli's classicizing works) as well as classical ones, yet the various posing of the different Muses belies a debt to the close observation of antique sculpture. Even in this work, however, there is no

doubt that Puvis' sense of mystery and detachment from this world already begins to depart from Academicism. And it is clear that for the artist there was no contradiction between that mystery and the Greek body.

Yet it would be problematic to describe Puvis' art as erotic. In this important respect, we are still at one remove from the full-blown Symbolism that is the focus of this study. But Puvis' Arcadian dream was one that remained very dear to the Symbolists, and – as we shall see – even in turning towards more obviously erotic classical themes (such as the cult of Dionysus), they kept one foot in that dream. A poem by the French poet and classicist Pierre Quillard (1864–1912), 'Verse for Hymnis', published in the *Mercure de France* (Aurier 1892: 162), captures succinctly that classical Arcadia of the Symbolists – inherited from Neoclassicism via Puvis and others – including the Elysian and Dionysian imagery that was so often its backdrop:

Verse for Hymnis

Come and breathe the smell of the vines and of the fruit.

Tonight will be sweet for you like your long nights,  
Hymnis, child who has slept for two thousand years,  
And by the slow breath of the paths whither I fly  
The roses of the tomb won't fade.

I dedicate to you, child, the dying forest.

She is fair despite her secret ailing:  
You will identify yourself in her noble agony,  
Virgin whose pale and febrile brow was adorned  
With glittering gold and the wan columbine.

The funereal autumn embalms the thickets.

Hymnis! Hymnis! Hymnis! Your loosened hair,  
Free from the frail headband in which you imprison it,  
Has brushed the sandalwood and clove trees  
And is drunk with cruel autumns.

Tonight, calmer perfumes will charm you.

So that your sacred body returns without insult  
From the distant forest to the divine shadows,

I desire to weave about your brow  
 The Thyrsus in the half-mourning of the last wisteria.<sup>12</sup>

Quillard's inspiration in ancient Greek literature is clear – more specifically the lyric poetry of the Greek poet Anacreon (582–485 BC), whom the French poet and playwright Theodore de Banville (1823–91) had drawn upon in his lyric comedy *Hymnis* (1879). Quillard's is very much the same world that Puvis and other Symbolist artists imagined when they pictured their classical Arcadias, and it is one that we will find they return to again and again in many different contexts.

The American painter and illustrator Vedder was another Symbolist artist who had one foot firmly in Arcadia. Vedder spent long periods in Europe, including in Paris in the 1850s, and subsequently in Florence copying classical and Renaissance works. Best known for his Symbolist illustrations to the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1884), Vedder was a close associate of several literary personalities of his day, including Mark Twain. His work is heavily inspired by the classics, and from 1866 the artist settled permanently in Rome, building a villa on Capri. In a similar vein to Puvis, his allegorical work *Rome Representative of the Arts*<sup>13</sup> (1894) references antiquity as the font of artistic inspiration itself. Vedder's oil painting is a completed study for a mural he undertook for the Walker Art Building of Bowdoin College in Brunswick (Maine), alongside murals by other artists representing Athens, Venice and Florence – together signifying the great historical art centres. The commission came in the context of a wider spate of Neoclassical commissions in the United States during the 1890s, as official and institutional demand increased for architectural decoration recalling the glories of the classical past. In the centre of Vedder's painting a female nude stands in contrapposto pose (after Praxiteles, with one hip lowered and one shoulder raised), representing nature – the ultimate inspiration for all art. As in the pediment of an ancient Greek temple, she is flanked by two seated female figures draped in robes, representing 'Knowledge' and 'Colour'. These hold various attributes, including a paint palette and a sheaf of parchment, and are in turn accompanied by two winged children, representing Love and the Soul. Among various other objects are a tree of life, a harp, and male and female statues, respectively indicating life, harmony, wisdom and form (as we read in the Italian inscriptions beneath them).

As is typical of Vedder's style, the allegory is dense and somewhat overwhelming. The painting (and mural), however, closely reflect the artist's personal ideals about art and – as Puvis – how closely these were intertwined with an ideal of the classical world. In his memoirs, Vedder (1910: 141) states that:

My idea of the aim of Art was – first have an idea, and then from your experiences and the nature about you get the material to clothe it. In fact, take a soul and give it a body.

For Vedder, as for so many other painters at this time, the majority of the experience that they had to draw on in creating that art had been gained in Neoclassical ateliers, where they had been encouraged to endlessly copy the canon of classical art. Though Vedder (1910: 140) does not admit this directly, he suggests that he might have spent more time painting from nature had he not rather focused on the figure: 'I loved landscape, but was eternally urged to paint the figure; thus my landscape was spoiled by the time devoted to figure; and the figure suffered by my constant flirting with landscape.'

Vedder's reference to figure and landscape here hints at another aspect of Neoclassical painting that would have been part of the education of many Symbolists: the depiction of the figure in the landscape, often in a mythological context. Moreover, conventions often applied to the treatment of certain classical themes, such as Venus emerging from the ocean, or the Muses in a bucolic idyll (as in Puvis' painting discussed above). Over time, the Symbolists moved away from these conventions, tending to isolate mythological figures from their conventional contexts, and either transposing them to new, mystical worlds or simply doing away with any contextualizing landscape altogether. Rops is one such artist who was happy to depart convention in his classically inspired illustrations – and yet, as his letters show, even he struggled to do away entirely with this association between the figure and landscape. Complaining of how he wishes to paint nude figures in the French landscape, but is continually prevented from doing so by the police, Rops (1912: 49–50) laments to his correspondent:

One of my worries, my dear friend, is the police. In no place in this promised France can one put beautiful naked legs before a brook and paint them in their best light. But I got the idea in my head and so, driven on by the hate

which has turned me against all law and all the natural haemorrhoidals, I have found nooks and crannies where the gendarmes – fearing snakes – do not dare to go, and there I paint in the most beautiful light in pastures they won't choose. Galateas, such as would make the honest Virgil blush. *Fugit ad Salizette!*<sup>14</sup>

Rops' reference to his Galateas being such that they would have made the Roman poet Virgil – known for his bucolic idylls populated by chaste shepherds – blush is no exaggeration (the reference being to Virgil's *Eclogue* 1, which tells of the love of Tityrus and Galatea). Rops, aware of both the frivolousness of his desire to paint his nudes in the outdoors, but also angry at the social conventions that prevented him from doing so, passes an ironic comment about the gap between the traditional subject matter of Academic painting and the world in which he lives. As we will see, the forced bridging of that gap, involving the abrupt transposition of erotic classical themes onto the modern world – frequently in a sardonic manner – was characteristic of Rops' work.

Another Symbolist whose early figure painting straddles the boundaries of Neoclassicism and Symbolism is the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918). From 1890 onwards Hodler's energetic two-dimensional paintings, which focused on the (often nude) figure in a variety of expressive and emotive poses, frequently depicted in strong contrasting colours, propelled him to the forefront of the European Symbolist movement. He was closely connected to the Vienna Secession from about 1899, enjoying great success when he first exhibited with them in 1904,<sup>15</sup> and also exhibiting in Péladan's 'Salon of the Rose + Croix'. His work was much appreciated in Switzerland, where it was felt to be emblematic of a certain brand of the Swiss national character – reviewing his contributions to the 1891 Salon de Champ de Mars independents' exhibition, the *Journal de Genève* ('Geneva Journal') referred to his work as 'geological painting', which brought the energy and might of the mountainous Swiss landscape into it.<sup>16</sup> Many of Hodler's figures have a monumental quality to them. In his *Day*<sup>17</sup> (1899) (which also exists in a later, slightly variant, version<sup>18</sup>), first exhibited in the Paris World Exhibition of 1899, Hodler presented five seated female nudes in a very new way. Hieratically posed around a central woman, who faces the observer with arms raised towards the sun, the other figures form a descending semi-circle around her. To her immediate left and right, two red-haired women shield their eyes from us as they face towards her,



while they are in turn flanked by two dark-haired women who appear to be in the act of prayer at the coming of day. Behind the central nude we see the sun rising, illuminating all of the figures, while all around them blue flowers spring from the earth. Hodler's arrangement of his female nudes here is absolutely characteristic of his painting, where their symmetry and monumental arrangement is intended to mirror the order of nature. The painting formed a counterpart to another earlier, and more famous, painting, *Night*<sup>19</sup> (1890). That – more pessimistic – work, which won a gold medal in Munich in 1897, had depicted a terrifying scene of seven sleeping figures, including Hodler himself between his wife Bertha Stucki and his mistress Augustine Dupin. A figure in a black cloak sits atop the male figure in the centre of the canvas, who awakes in terror. Both paintings show the artist's facility in giving new expressive form to the nude, which continues to be symbolic (as in his *Day*), and yet may also be a medium for the expression of inner states (as in his *Night*), including the erotic.

Hodler's *Night* is characteristic of a new interest in the sexual unconscious that characterizes the 1890s and turn of the century. For many Symbolists, this interest became a sort of obsession. We have already discussed Huysmans' description of Des Esseintes' encounter with Moreau's *Salome*. But it is worth reflecting briefly on the meaning of the erotic for the Symbolists, and how this changed for those that followed in the wake of Puvis, Gauguin and other Post-Impressionists. The *Le Symbolisme en Europe* exhibition catalogue (Musées Royaux D'art et D'histoire (Belgium) and Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen 1976: 15) summarizes the dynamic that characterizes the Symbolist conception of the sexual union of man and woman:

Yet this union, the fruit of the personal conviction of some, was no more than a chimera which bourgeois perception of the time lagged far behind. The act of love was in effect considered by the morality of the period not as an experience of the communion between man and woman, but as the experience of a pleasure which, evoked in man by woman, robs him of his conscience and drives him towards a precipice. Man thus found himself facing woman as a different and incomprehensible being, who could lift him to great heights but might just as well destroy him.<sup>20</sup>

Not every Symbolist saw love and sex in quite as reductionist a manner as this. Several also considered that the erotic could be (at least potentially) an optimistic force. But by degrees all at least shared a sort of awe at its irrational

power. That was often allied with the view that the age-old debate about the power of reason and the power of feeling might have been a futile one. Redon (1922: 50) summarized his personal conception of falling in love as follows:

‘The heart has its reasons’, it has them, it pursues them, it deliberates within us according to secret and infinitely mysterious laws, so much so that at the moment of meeting a woman – a chance meeting – it takes control of the entire person; it’s domination, an invasion, a strange failing where one no longer observes clearly what behaviour is, where the idea of good and evil no longer applies, or is no longer necessary, because what belongs to the heart at that divine moment is thus something of the eternal.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth reiterating the point made above: the Symbolists were rarely moralists. Their obsession with the overpowering nature of erotic love was less one of disapproval than of sheer fascination. This is clear from Redon’s words here. But there was also a wider current within Symbolism that strove to disassociate all morality from art, in which they believed it had no place. Theirs was the world of feeling, of emotion pure and simple, not of grand moral statement, of lessons, of national prowess. It was from this that their distaste for the didactic or valorizing qualities of Academicism had in part stemmed. Montfort (1902: 47), in an essay in *La Plume* entitled ‘Eternal Life and Art in Modern Life’, characterized this view that morality was utterly irrelevant to art:

Singular artist! For morality or immorality, what does it mean to him? He is an observer of men, of all men, of life, of all life. Should such-and-such a virtue appear to him, he admires it; should such-and-such a vice appear to him, he admires it still. Is he before a just and pure being? He considers it with exaltation – but one moment later, he will consider the contrary figure, a nasty and cunning being, with just the same exaltation. The two interest him, captivate his spirit. They each awake in him something characteristic of their life for him, of human life; each one plunges him into moving reflections. Different aspects of humanity, of thought, of beauty, they intoxicate and inspire him.<sup>22</sup>

For the Symbolists, man’s sexual unconscious was a reality. And that reality was often more present for them than the intrigues of the real world that the Realist writers and artists aspired to capture in their work. For many of the Symbolists we look at in this book, turning back to the classics was an immediate way to escape the mundanity of the modern world around them, by effectively

bypassing it. But this was not quite the pure escapism to the classics that had characterized some earlier periods; rather it was a way of directly accessing mankind's true erotic nature, divesting it of all the heavy pomp and costume which Academicism had laid upon it, something which the false pretensions of Realism had – in their view – only further exacerbated.

The Greek body in ancient art, Greek myth, and the legends of Rome all served the Symbolists as vehicles for the direct expression of human sexuality. Rops is a case in point in this respect, so it is right that we consider him first. Born in Namur in Belgium, Rops was considered by his contemporaries as one of the greatest erotic satirists of his generation. His works are so explicit in their depictions of sexuality as to in many cases be pornographic. This meant that his works were not universally understood in their time, although few doubted his prowess as a draughtsman. Rops was entirely unapologetic of his art, however, and we have the benefit of his having also been a keen writer, where a large corpus of his correspondence survives and provides a good insight into his character and the motivations that lay behind his art.<sup>23</sup> Rops (1912: 5) summarized these as follows:

I can anyhow only work in accordance with nature. To try and put that in as straightforward a way as possible, what I feel in my nerves and see with my eyes; that is my whole aesthetic, and that which I try to practise, and I find that alone hard enough. I do not yet have any talent, but perhaps I will get some through willpower and patience.<sup>24</sup>

We should understand Rops' reference to 'nature' here very broadly. For from his work it is clear that this largely encompassed human nature. He was fascinated by the urban world in which he lived, and its eroticism. For him this was focused in Paris, with its life, its artists and above all its women. As Rops (1912: 27–8) described the city:

But Paris is the best city in the world to live and to die in. Since the war, a whole generation of artists and poets has come up there. People who were fifteen years old during the siege, and have the devil and devil woman in their flesh. All of it is jolly, entertaining, full of movement, and the women here are prettier than they ever were. Paris takes hold of me, and my enamoured eyes pursue the black tips of the little shoes under the cloud of skirts, such as one only sees here. . . Perhaps here one lives too much with the head, but elsewhere too much with the belly and crotch.<sup>25</sup>

Rops' real fascination with the city was with its women. He freely admits that they are the primary inspiration for his art, and of his need to be close to them. As Rops (1912: 37) explains of the modern city more generally, including London too in his scope:

I know almost all my women, and they let me into their dressing rooms so that I can get nearer to the truth. You know, I am quite given over to modern life and believe that, if one wants to paint, one must find it where it shows up in its strongest intensity – in London or Paris – and one must stay current with English life if one is to understand London.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, however, Rops' work is fascinating for how it turns back to Greek myth. This is perhaps the uniqueness of the artist; he is utterly submerged in the eroticism of modern Parisian life, but at the same time expresses it through the Greek body. That body is often greatly transformed, and sexualized in a way it had not been before, but the clarity of Rops' classical inspiration is rarely lost altogether.

We will encounter many examples of the various ways in which the artist transformed the Greek body, but one work in particular – and one of his most famous – provides a good introduction to understanding this dynamic in his art. His *Lady with the Pig* or *Pornocrates*<sup>27</sup> (1878) (Figure 8) encapsulates well this simultaneous concern with contemporary eroticism and with the classics. Rops' enigmatic watercolour, which was shown in the 1886 exhibition of Octave Maus' (1856–1919) Belgian artistic association the Cercle de Vingt ('The Twenty'), depicts a blindfolded young woman, naked save for hat, gloves and stockings, being led along by a pig. She is set against a blue starry sky, where three cupids sport. She walks above a sort of classical frieze, in which a number of male putti are shown, each wearing a laurel wreath and together forming a classical allegory of the arts (variously inscribed above them). These are depicted in a variety of poses, accompanied by the attributes of their particular art, but are universally downcast, holding their heads in their hands or bent over in despair – Rops referred to them in a letter as 'groaning'.<sup>28</sup> Beneath them Rops has written 'Pornocrates', in Greek letters as if an inscription. The title of Rops' work likely refers to the French politician and philosopher Pierre Joseph Proudhon's (1809–65) treatise, *Pornocrates, or Women in Modern Times* (1875). Proudhon had penned a number of works of

a misogynist nature, in this treatise arguing for the subordination of women by men as a means of avoiding the inevitable cultural degeneracy that would otherwise ensue. Rops' inclusion of the Greek inscription is a sarcastic commentary on Proudhon's work, a play on its etymology of *pornê* ('prostitute') and *kratia* ('power'), suggesting the contemporary dominion of prostitution and resultant futility of Proudhon's arguments. In a letter of 1879, Rops (1912: 34) reflects upon the conditions under which he conceived of *Pornocrates*:

In Paris – ah, *coups de Paris* – I had the opportunity of seeing the black, red-flowered, silk stockings of a beautiful girl whose loved one is in Monaco. I painted her naked like a goddess, pulled long black gloves over those beautiful slender hands I've been kissing for three years, coiffed her with one of those big Gainsboroughs in black gold velvet – such as lends the women of more recent times the lazy dignity of those of the seventeenth century – and my 'Pornokratie' was ready. I am quite taken . . . with this drawing. It has almost the same dimensions as the 'Temptation', and I completed it in four days in an overheated salon, blue satin, full of perfume, where the opopanax and cyclamen gave me a slight fever, which was propitious for the work. Will anyone buy it? But that does not matter.<sup>29</sup>

Rops' description here speaks to the point made above about the Symbolists and sexual morals. He, as most other Symbolists, was far from a moralist. But the (posthumous) publication of Proudhon's treatise a few years earlier does show that other thinkers of his time were not universally as sexually liberal as Rops was, and the artist's work would have been critically received in some quarters as immoral. However something that personally irked the artist, and which caused distaste for many of his artistic contemporaries, was the perception of a certain sexual hypocrisy on the part of the bourgeoisie – whose members gave the outward appearance of morality, but by night repaired to the Parisian cabarets. Discussing Rops – whose art he greatly admired for its uncompromising nature, and the eroticism of which he felt had a more spiritual than carnal quality – Huysmans (1908: 116) praised him as: 'The only one who, among the crowd of crayonists, is able to formulate the syntheses of the frontispiece, of which he remains the sole master, and the only one of sufficient quality to realize a work which encapsulates the liabilities of the Eternal Vice.'<sup>30</sup> Huysmans (1908: 21–2, 78) classes Rops together with other leading Symbolists



**Figure 8** Félicien Rops, *The Lady with the Pig/Pornocrates/Pornocratie*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

(including Baudelaire, Moreau and Redon), singling out the artist's erotic imagination as a virtue:

Exceptional beings, who retrace the steps of centuries gone by and cast themselves, in disgust at the promiscuities they are forced to undergo ... in the tumultuous space of nightmares and dreams ... Everyone knows in practice that continence engenders thoughts of libertine and frightful nature, such that the man who is not Christian – and by consequence involuntarily pure – above all overheats in solitude, exalts and wanders; and thus, in his waking dreams he goes right to the limit of orgiastic delirium.<sup>31</sup>

These ideas are reflected in Rops' (1912: 28–9) own writings, from which it is clear that he found a sort of perverse purity in the uncompromising sexuality of his art and the dedication with which he gave himself over to it:

I do not know what direction my art is taking, whether I'm old fashioned or in the new game. The only thing I know is that I do honest work to the best of my ability . . . Whether my drawing is any good or whether it's bad, I don't know. I work on it in all honesty, that is all. I work like a Benedictine.<sup>32</sup>

But public taste was perhaps not as far advanced as that of Rops or Huysmans. Where the classics had offered a sort of shield for many Neoclassicists in providing a context in which the nude and themes of an erotic nature could be acceptable (and continued to provide such for at least some Symbolists), in his transformations of the Greek body Rops' sexual allegories were now pushing it beyond the boundaries of any purpose it had been made to serve in earlier art.

In a number of more risqué drawings, Rops deliberately took the artistic conventions governing the association between the classics and the erotic, and extended them as far as he could – an exercise which occasionally resulted in absurdity. His *The Beautiful Peacock*<sup>33</sup> (undated) is one such example, which depicts a nude adolescent female sat enthralled before what appears to be a sort of phallic altar. Radiating out from behind a large phallic sculpture are the feathers of a peacock (in an ironic reference to the drawing's title). While the classical reference is not in this case specific, vague reference to the Roman cult of Priapus is fairly common throughout his work.<sup>34</sup> In another sexually explicit watercolour sketch, his *Journey to the Land of the Old Gods*<sup>35</sup> (undated), Rops makes still clearer his ideal of a sexually libidinous classical past. In the sketch Rops imagines a ridiculous scenario in which two modern women have been transported back into the Arcadian world of fauns. The two dishevelled women, whose bonnets have fallen off and whose modern clothing has been cast aside, face away from us as they mount two shaggy fauns. The latter lustfully clasp the women and pull them towards them, one sat on the branches of a tree and another sprawled on the ground. Rops clearly intends us to imagine this 'land of the old gods' as the classical Arcadia, just rendered after his erotic imagination. Gone is the world of the understated and suggestive eroticism of the bathing nymph and the sporting faun. Instead, Rops cuts wholesale across such Neoclassical convention. In so doing, the artist stakes

out a claim for a new understanding of that classical Arcadia, one primarily erotic and divested of all moral pretence – and one that can be a vehicle for undermining the false sexual prudery of his contemporaries.

We can contextualize his approach to the classical past in his art in light of his personal life. Writing to a friend in 1872, Rops (1912: 11–12) details a love affair that began through a chance meeting in the ruins of a Roman villa:

I can't come out this Saturday night, as I'm not free: there's a little lady, blonde as a new coin, who in my opinion demands me by the roundness of her knee. One cannot refuse such things if one is a male artist – one must have the civility of one's sex and of one's art in mind. I met her in a Roman villa that I recently discovered. I had drunk a colossal amount, rather too much of Romanée 1858: I saw the poplars over their crests, the towers over the weathercocks. Charming things were sung to me in the native dialect of those parts, and came in this manner to the ruins, in which I had expected to find some archaeologist or historian picking at the rubble, but instead found a blonde-haired and blue-eyed young lady, who asked me laughingly:

- You are Mr Octave, are you not?
- That I am, was, and will be. Madam, I answer you under the influence of Romanée 58. But for the moment I am called Quintus Flavius and am a centurion, a Roman officer, charged with untying the belt of a blonde lady.
- I never wear a belt, good sir!
- Quite as myself! Let's unite our hearts. Ah, if only we might understand one another, we might populate these ruins again!

We did understand each other. She is a student fresh out of college, who comes from the village castle and is looking for a job. I saw her round knee, as the song goes, and will see it again in Brussels. She is as pretty as a Fragonard and dimples on her back too. Eighteen years old! What more can one ask of the gods?<sup>36</sup>

This is a playful passage, but one which again betrays the deep immersion of a Symbolist in classical literature. The references to poplar trees signify idyllic poetry, while his casting himself as a Roman centurion is reminiscent of Ovid's love poetry and its recurrent theme of the *militia amoris* ('soldiery of love'). There is a strong overtone throughout of the classical world as signifier for sexual freedom and revelry.



This dynamic was not unique to Rops, but is more generally true of the Symbolists. As we shall see in the chapters which follow on the female and male bodies, it often accompanied a critical narrative about Christian morality, and in particular a historical perception about the Christian Middle Ages as an age of the repression of feeling, and of human nature more generally. Huysmans (1908: 89–90) characterized this Symbolist historical narrative as follows:

Deified by Paganism, which venerated her in her various incarnations of Venus and Priapus, Luxury – which later became a Christian sin – was symbolised in the carnal dance of Herodiades.<sup>37</sup> Thereafter she delivered to the Old Harrower of Souls, like fertile lands, the lost souls of Saints, tortured the lonely in their solitary retreats, through the centuries turning to bad ways the resolute chastity of the cloisters.<sup>38</sup>

This led many Symbolists, taking their initial cue from Péladan and the occultists, to use the devil as a symbol for the world of sexual freedom they sought. The devil and occult symbolism became a sort of poetic and artistic proxy for a new kind of humanity. This was not always, or even often, a narrowly anti-Christian polemic. Many Symbolists were simply interested in expressing man's (and woman's) eroticism for its own sake. Classical myth was one symbol they used for this. Diabolic imagery was another. And often the iconography of the two became confused, particularly in the mythological figure of the satyr or faun.

Nor was this Symbolist use of the devil always intended entirely seriously – even if some of their contemporaries might unintentionally have taken it so. Rops' use of diabolic imagery, while highly erotically charged and frequently flippant concerning Christian sensibilities, is nonetheless largely tongue-in-cheek. His nine illustrations, *Weird Women* (*/The Diabolical Women*)<sup>39</sup> (1882), which were commissioned by the French publisher Alphonse Lemerre (1838–1912) to accompany a reprint of the French novelist and social critic Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's (1808–89) 1874 collection of short stories of the same title, are typical of this dynamic. D'Aurevilly's series of six tales on aristocratic themes blended horror, irony and comedy. Rops read the stories in detail and sought to capture their spirit in his illustrations.<sup>40</sup> Reflecting d'Aurevilly's stories, many verge on the most bizarre manifestations of the occult. But they also demonstrate – as Rops' *Journey to the Land of the Old Gods* discussed above – the free mixture

of ancient myth and iconography with that of the modern *femme fatale*. While several of the illustrations are erotic satires on themes relating to the occult, such as an atheist's dinner party (complete with naked lady on the dining table), or death masquerading as a prostitute, the first illustration of the series ('The Sphinx') mixes ancient and diabolical imagery. A nude blonde-haired woman has strewn herself on a great stone statue of a sphinx, which sits atop a pedestal carved with what appears to be a Medusa head with snakes. Loitering malevolently behind the sphinx, stood between its wings and observing the scene with an evident perverted pleasure, is the devil – sporting evening wear (from which protrudes his giant phallus). Husymans (1908: 114–15), who interpreted the woman in this drawing as seeking to seduce the sphinx to reveal the 'supernatural secret of undreamt joys and novel sins', described her as follows: 'Vicious and coaxing, she rubs her flesh against the granite of the monster, attempting to seduce it, offering herself up to it as to a man from whom she wanted to extract money, but remaining a girl – even when transported into this scene beyond the world, even when amplified by this eternal nudity of a goddess or of Eve.'<sup>41</sup> This (half-satirical) image is a good summary of Rops' typical blend of ancient iconography and diabolical symbolism.

Though he took a very different approach to that of Rops, another formative artist for the Symbolists' erotic transformations of the Greek body was Klinger. We have already touched on the heavy classicism of the German artist's work. Klinger, who was an admirer of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528),<sup>42</sup> is today best known for his drawings. These certainly share Rops' penchant for the fantastic. The erotic also plays a prominent role in his work, but in a far more understated and enigmatic way than it does in Rops' illustrations. Perhaps his most famous work, *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* (1881),<sup>43</sup> which elicited a strong critical reaction at the Berlin Art Union in 1878 for its uncompromising and daring subject matter (alongside his *Suggestions for a Competition on the Theme of Christ*), consisted of a series of deeply psychological drawings illustrating the story of a young man who develops a fetishist obsession with a woman's elbow-length glove after picking it up at an ice rink. Klinger's drawings show the development of the young man's mania, as he is haunted in his dreams by images of the glove.<sup>44</sup> Their style was very experimental, doing away with convention by focusing almost entirely on his subject's inner state, and expressing this through the almost surrealist and incongruous juxtaposition of

figure, object and landscape – often deliberately drawn out of scale. Even today it is difficult to decipher the exact meaning of many of Klinger's Symbolist drawings, and contemporary misunderstanding drew criticism of them from some quarters.<sup>45</sup> In later chapters, we will encounter other examples of similarly psychological drawings that he completed on themes drawn from classical literature. For our purposes, however, it is also important to note that his later, and less well-known, sculptural work often engages very directly with the Greek body, in a continual process of reinventing classical art – of which, as discussed in the introduction, he was a great connoisseur. This interest in sculpture also extended to a consideration of the materials used in ancient sculpture, and is reflected in his work in an experimentation with polychrome nudes and statues made in materials of several colours – an attempt to imitate ancient Greek chryselephantine sculpture. Reflecting his interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is unsurprising that the artist's final (unfinished) work was a colossal statue of Richard Wagner (1813–83).

Klinger, who had received his artistic education in Karlsruhe and Berlin and was inspired by the Swiss Symbolist artist and classicist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) (whom he met during travels in Italy<sup>46</sup>), is of key importance to this study given his simultaneous obsession with Greek art and loathing of Academicism. As mentioned above, the artist had developed a strong distaste for what he saw as the distortions of earlier false receptions of the classics. This was closely connected to his beliefs about what made art. Central to Klinger's (1885: 24) conception of art is the primary importance of form:

A running human body, on which the light shines in such a way that it only expresses restfulness and in no way emotion, is – consummately painted – already a picture, a work of art. For the artist the 'idea' is in the development of form in accordance with the posing of the body, in its relationship with space, in its colour combinations, and it is quite the same to him whether it is Endymion or Peter. For the artist this idea is enough, and it is enough! Our current taste, however, demands that first and foremost we know for sure whether it's Endymion or not.

He continues in a footnote:

I am convinced that all these inescapable pretty maidens' heads – Ada – Hermine – Lydia – would completely disappear from the illustrated journals,

if their individual names were no longer placed beneath them. I have observed that a face appearing in a paper in such fashion, named only as 'Study', left an art friend quite cold – but appearing as 'Klara' in another got a lot of attention.<sup>47</sup>

Klinger favoured Greek art because it had prioritized form, and this at the expense of all else, in its quest for perfect beauty. But Klinger not only wrote about that beauty, he also experimented with trying to recreate the forms of Greek art in his sculpture, the great difference between whose style and that of his drawings is a tribute to his sheer versatility as an artist.

Something of the transition between the two can be seen in a painting of his known as *The Blue Hour*<sup>48</sup> (1890). In this painting, Klinger put paid to the convention of Academic painting – which, as we have related above, he took personal objection to – that to be respectable the nude should only be depicted in a clearly identifiable biblical or mythological context. Instead, in an enigmatic composition, Klinger places three variously posed nudes on a rock out at sea. No clear mythological theme emerges, the composition serving rather as an experiment in the expressive posing of the female nude. On the left of the painting a fair-haired young woman stands facing the observer frontally, her head and arms raised, exposing her naked torso and legs. Lying next to her on another rock, a second dark-haired woman looks on at us languidly, leaning on her left shoulder and with her right arm hanging lazily off the edge of the rock. Finally, on the right of the painting, we see a red-haired woman sat with legs crossed, leaning her head against her knee as she looks down to her right lost in thought. Klinger partially highlights the figures at the sides of the painting, leaving the central figure a pallid grey in the shade. Various lit by an apparently inconsistent source of light, their various attitudes, and seeming lack of awareness of one another, imply an independent existence in a reflection of the artist's simple interest in the possibilities of the human form. Though compositionally different, we continue to detect the influence of Puvis' *Young Girls at the Seaside* of over a decade earlier.

A few years later in the mid-1890s, Klinger returned from the Greek island of Syros with an old marble step which he planned to use to carve a torso. This ultimately became the full-length armless sculpture *Amphitrite*<sup>49</sup> (1895–99). Amphitrite was traditionally considered the wife of the sea god Poseidon – a choice of subject likely motivated by the island provenance of the marble.

Klinger had originally intended to limit his sculpture to just the goddess's naked torso but in the end also included her draped legs. Nonetheless, none of her physical attributes specifically identify her as Amphitrite. She rests her weight on her right leg, as she pivots very slightly, turning her head. Many commentators have focused on her enigmatic and distant, yet piercing gaze. Her face has at first sight the characteristically ethereal and timeless cast of an ancient Greek sculpture, but is on closer inspection highly expressive. The more we look into her eyes, the greater is the impression that we behold an animate being encased in marble, one that might come alive at any moment. It is a challenging work. As Keisch (2005: 122) puts it:

A challenging gaze, a self-celebratory, proudly assertive femininity and physicality – is this a sea goddess or society lady? Klinger's Symbolist ambivalence – the modern torsion that comes from Rodin, the combination of different marbles that was typical of the period, and the only partially preserved polychrome treatment of the surface – all of these produce a multiple but ambiguously interrelated medley in the spirit of the *fin de siècle*.

It is as if Klinger wants to take the marble of ancient Greek sculpture and breathe into it again its soul. In a sort of resurrection of the ancient, he casts out the stultified legacy of false Neoclassicisms and reclaims the Greek body for his own. In so doing, he puts into practice his theoretical ideal of reviving Greek form, and makes it Symbolist.

Another central aspect of Klinger's art, and of his classical receptions, was music. We have seen an example above of his declared devotion to the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, something to which many artists and poets of the period, including several Symbolists, subscribed. Frequently this went hand in hand with a veneration of Wagner, whose operatic spectacles were held in a certain adulation as epitomizing that ideal.<sup>50</sup> The paramount importance of music to Klinger's conception of artistic expression is shown in several of his series of drawings. Certain of them take their cue from specific composers, including his *Brahms Fantasy*<sup>51</sup> (1894), a tribute to the eponymous artist. The *Brahms Fantasy* illustrates Johannes Brahms' (1833–97) *Song of Destiny* (1871), an orchestral-accompanied choral setting of Friedrich Hölderlin's (1770–1843) *Hyperions Schicksalslied* ('Hyperion's Song of Fate') from the latter's unfinished novel *Hyperion* (1797). Klinger, as many of the Symbolists we consider in this book, believed in a natural syncretism of the arts – an idea

which underlay the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For many Symbolists, music enjoyed the status of primary art form – the purest of all, as it were, as being that which spoke most directly to man's soul. By definition, then, the finest poetry and visual art must be as nearly indistinguishable from music as possible, and share in its symphony. In his *Beethoven Frieze* (1902), the *Jugendstil* artist Klimt had also summarized this synthesis of music, poetry and the visual arts – a frieze Klimt had designed to accompany Klinger's statue of Beethoven, exhibited alongside it at the Vienna Secession.

Klinger's transformations of the classics are frequently set within a musical context, where music, lyric poetry and love become one continuum, even if music itself is not always the primary focus. The artist dedicated his *Opus II: Rescues of Ovid's Victims*, whose title page we consider here (1879),<sup>52</sup> to the composer Robert Schumann (1810–56). This series of thirteen prints considers three tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Pyramus and Thisbe (4.55–92), Echo and Narcissus (3.339–510), and Apollo and Daphne (1.1–566). True to Ovid, his portrayal of these myths is generally ironic, but several of the prints also have strongly theatrical and musical qualities. At the same time Klinger engages directly with the Ovidian erotic literary tradition, and the *Metamorphoses'* powerful legacy for later understandings of classical myth, by overturning conventions about the consistently tragic fates of his mythological heroes and heroines (which arise often as a result of the ill-fated admiration of their lovers). The title page, 'Evocation', sets the Arcadian setting for the amatory adventures of Ovid's protagonists to follow. We see a landscape idyll in ancient Greece. Nudes bask in the sunshine amid the river rushes, in the shade of the poplar trees. In the background we see a rocky acropolis topped by a Doric temple. Foregrounding all of this generically classical scene is a sculpted head of Venus set atop a column decorated with a garland. The whole scene is framed with borders consisting of reliefs and columns, featuring more fantastic mythological designs. Intended to capture the spirit of the particular collection of drawings to which it belongs, 'Evocation' is also a neat summation of Klinger's conception of the classical world as a whole: a sunny Arcadia, in which the beauty of the Greek body has pride of place and is in perfect harmony with nature, and where art and the erotic are unstifled (signified by the central figure of Venus). The seamless unity of classical poetry and art – most perfectly expressed in their exaltation of the erotic – was itself a sort of

symphony for Klinger, one which he wanted to revive (but not, as others, slavishly copy) in his own work.

Klinger was not the only Symbolist who considered the erotic as something inherent to art, and any true expression of it. Vedder's *The Artist's Lesson, or Captive Cupid*<sup>53</sup> (c. 1875–80) is a meditation on this dynamic. In an original and curious composition, Vedder depicts an imagined scenario in which a young boy is made by his master, as part of his artistic training, to observe the captive Cupid. The boy, sat before his tutor (depicted in Italian Renaissance dress), furiously scribbles on parchment in his lap as he scrutinizes the nude figure of the boy Cupid, who has been rather unceremoniously tied to a tree and looks to his left, shying away from this attention. The somewhat blunt allegory appears to be that a budding artist must assiduously pursue the phenomenon of love if he wants his art to have any meaning. Vedder lacks the subtler elegance of other Symbolists in making this allusion (see discussion of Redon below), but the point is nonetheless a fundamental one. For the Symbolists, the erotic was not just one of many subjects of art; it was, in a certain sense, *the* subject, the only truly worthy object of any great art. And it is no accident that Vedder chooses to depict love in his classical attire.

One consequence of this is that, even where sexuality is not the primary subject of a given Symbolist work, there is nonetheless often an erotic overtone. A modern observer might too easily misconstrue this as meaning that the Symbolists were only really interested in sex – and, in Rops' case at least, such an argument could plausibly be made. Yet such a reductionist reading misunderstands the nature of the Symbolists' relationship with the erotic. Rather than subject, often the erotic itself is a sort of symbol: a symbol that speaks to the inner world of man, and which may – by a mysterious process – unlock some greater understanding. And, as the chapters which follow demonstrate, that symbol often took on classical dress in the form of the Greek body. Vedder, whose art is on the surface only weakly erotic, is nonetheless a good example of this dynamic. *The Pleiades*<sup>54</sup> (1885), his first painting illustrating the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, depicts the seven female figures representing the astronomer-poet's horoscope, the seven daughters of Atlas and the nymph Pleione in Greek myth. The seven beautiful young women form a circle, suspended in the night sky, their arms raised as they perform the cosmic dance. In their hands they hold aloft the thread that binds them,

symbolizing their connection with one another and with Jupiter. All are bathed in light save the central figure, in whose hands the thread has broken, representing the lost Pleiad. Yet there is something undeniably erotic about the Pleiades themselves, who all wear the Greek *chiton* tunic in various states of undress. Vedder clearly intended – whether or not we judge with success – that his figures be simultaneously harmonious and alluring, symbolically representing the beauty of the stellar constellation in the form of the Greek body.

Another comparable example, where this function of the erotic as itself symbol is still more clear, is the work of the Italian Symbolist sculptor Leonardo Bistolfi (1859–1933). Bistolfi, who had trained at the Accademia di Brera in Milan and the Accademia Albertina in Turin, spent much of his career designing funerary monuments and allegories of death, earning the epithet ‘the sculptor of grief’. His work was much appreciated in Italy during his lifetime, and he frequently exhibited towards the end of the century, including at the Venice Biennale exhibition. Many of his works allegorize love and death. His *The Song of Love*<sup>55</sup> (1905–08), a relief in plaster, shows how the artist entertained a spiritual ideal of erotic love, a theme which surfaces in several of his works. The relief depicts a male and female nude as they kiss and embrace. The female figure has pressed herself against the male, as he rises towards the upper left of the composition. The two figures are caught in a swirl of motion as they appear suspended in mid-air, or in the waves of the sea (we are reminded of the representation of the moon goddess Selene on Roman sarcophagi, one of several possible inspirations for Bistolfi). The lines of this wave of air or ocean follow the movement of the figures, cascading over their heads like a crashing tidal wave, enclosing them and drawing us compositionally into their embrace. In a classic example of Art Nouveau line, the woman’s hair trails out behind her naked form, blending into the wave. The work’s title – inscribed in large letters to the right of the figures – with its reference to music and song, recalls the Symbolist conception of love and sexuality as artistic symphony.

The above examples suggest that many Symbolists did not find an inconsistency between the Greek body’s beauty and its inherent eroticism. One artist who played a pioneering role at an early stage in expressing this dynamic was the Swiss artist Böcklin. Böcklin, who worked in several artistic centres



during his career, including Düsseldorf, Antwerp, Brussels and Paris, but who found his main inspiration in the art, landscape and classical past of Italy – a country he visited several times from the 1850s onwards, and where he spent the last years of his life – is conventionally considered to have been a forerunner of the Symbolists. Best known for his sombre and mysterious painting *The Island of the Dead* (1880), inspired by the composer Sergey Rachmaninoff's (1873–1943) symphonic poem 'The Isle of the Dead', Böcklin's earlier work is equally characterized by his engagement with mythological themes of a less serious nature. His predilection for landscapes and seascapes drawn from an imaginary classical Arcadia, often featuring erotic mythological themes, exercised a powerful impact on the imagination of several later Symbolists. We have already encountered one such example in Klinger, but the influence of Böcklin's archetypal sporting sea nymphs and Tritons can be variously traced in the paintings of other artists that we consider in the chapters which follow, and we will return to discussing several of his works in detail.

An early Böcklin important to consider here given our interest in the Greek body is the *Abandoned Venus*<sup>56</sup> (1850–57). We are in a garden in a country estate somewhere (likely Italy given Böcklin's interests). The summer sun shines on the paving stones. We can make out, half-concealed in the bushes, beneath two stone columns topped with urns, a marble statue of Praxiteles' *Aphrodite*. Her face emerges from a pink rose bush as she looks out at us enigmatically. By coincidence, or divine contrivance, the roses have flowered all around her head. Yet Böcklin artfully ensures that his composition is otherwise sufficiently ordinary that we might just believe this to be a corner of a real garden somewhere, some serendipitous find on a summertime stroll. And yet there is also a definite unreality about the scene. The roses and rendering of her face make the marble Venus seem strangely alive, as if she knows that we are there, as if challenging us with her gaze. It is as if she might come to life any minute, taking human form as the Venus of Virgil's *Aeneid* or the Galatea of the Pygmalion myth (see below), stepping out of the shade of the rose bush. The pink highlights of those roses, surrounding her as a Venus in a grotto, draw our attention first to her figure and then to her gaze.

The painting tells us a lot about Böcklin's own rediscovery of the Greek body, but also serves as metaphor for that of many later Symbolists too. Böcklin here both symbolizes the lost glory of antique sculpture itself, and allegorizes

its continuing hold on the imagination of contemporary artists. There is a sense in which an at first sight apparently lifeless, and abandoned, ruin of Greek marble is instead – in its ultimate incarnation in the form of Praxiteles' *Aphrodite* – at once the repository of all great art and of the untapped yet vital sexual life of man. The outward appearance of the old gods may have disappeared from the modern world, hidden beneath the decaying ruins and overgrown gardens of ancient villas, but the spiritual and erotic truth they embody is still very much alive. Why else should the roses still flower? This is the real challenge of Venus' gaze. The observer is left pondering whether modern man, if he (for it is intended as a he) really is a creature of instinct, is ready to embrace that nature. Will he – indeed can he – ever realize his true potential? Perhaps he cannot. As in so much Symbolist art, there is an element of doubt, a suggestion that we moderns may irrevocably have lost touch with our essential nature. But mingled with this doubt is nonetheless some hope too, hope that even we may find our way back to our true nature by availing ourselves of the one thing that can help us in this quest: art. For Böcklin and later Symbolists, the rediscovery of the Greek body is, then, not only the rediscovery of Greek artistic form, but much more than that; it is the rediscovery of human nature itself.

In a letter from Rome in 1865, Böcklin (1909: 222) wrote that: 'The Fine Arts are not for the agony of humanity, but for its joy'. This perfectly summarizes the nature of that world the artist found in the classics. His earlier mythological works on classical themes are primarily of a joyful, if at times also pensive, nature – only in his fifties did he begin to paint the more melancholic works for which he is largely known today. As Gibson (2006: 125) puts it: 'Italy's light and aura of antiquity were decisive in his early development; his painting quickly came to be populated with mythological figures, with centaurs and naiads'. Cassou (1988: 44) has also spoken of Böcklin's 'ideal world of antiquity where he mixed mythology with a mysterious atmosphere'.<sup>57</sup> As a result, the artist's works had – and came to be known as having – a distinctive idiosyncratic brand of classicism. An essay on the artist in *La Plume* (Boës 1902: 501–2) poetically summarized his mythological work, interpreting it as a flight back to the more graceful world of the old gods, and as a rejection of the Romanticism which had culminated in the violence of the European revolutions of 1848:

The art and the thought of his time, which had overly glorified sheer energy, troubled him. Good souls turned away from the spectacle of the street and went back into the past to search for meaning. One wanted, as in another age, to have good cheer, free laughter, and the friendship of the gods.

The philologists – these modern ascetics – departed to explore Rome and Greece. They wanted to love anew the sacred groves and the wood nymphs.

The brutality of natural force wasn't enough. One hungered for spiritual nourishment and one feared banal idealism, antiquated and worn out.

For Greece, with its myths, and with its unterrifying and so human gods, puts to rest the violence of barbaric energy which the Christian will emphasized.

Boecklin also turned towards antique lands. Satyrs, nymphs, the goat gods – these exaggerations of human vigour – tempted him.

In Italy he knew the sky and the smile. He dreamt of Bacchus and his frolicking, the laughter of the Sileni, the disturbing grace of the Sirens.

With bright colours – at times offensive – and with the clumsiness of those in love, he painted landscapes and gods. However, the blood of the vigorous Swiss was sometimes harmed by such pleasant frolics.

And thus he burst out in curses. His colour intensified. White and blue and red dominated his visions. The sky again bristled with danger. Desolation blew through the trees, the desolation and terror of the energy which was vigorously felt and which could no longer find the sober gesture which befits real force . . .

But sometimes he softened! Antique wisdom and the thoughtful tale drew him in.<sup>58</sup>

*La Plume's* interpretation of Böcklin's flight to the fantastic worlds of classical mythology hints at a final point about the Symbolist reception of the antique – one worth noting here before we move to the more systematic consideration of that reception constituted by the rest of this book. This is that the erotic classical imagination of the Symbolists was not simply motivated by the need to escape from the moralizing strictures and perceived hypocrisy of the societies in which they lived. Another form of escapism inherent in Symbolist classicism is that of flight from death.

While much of the work of the Symbolists more generally is of a strongly macabre nature, their classical receptions for the most part tend rather towards being celebrations of life. This is of course not universally the case, but it is a dominant characteristic. We might, for example, compare the corpus of Redon's

works. His earlier drawings, on darker themes (his *noirs*), are far less classically inspired than the later works of what is conventionally referred to as his 'colour' period – several examples of which we will discuss in the chapters which follow. If this is an escape from death it is also sometimes an escape from violence (as per *La Plume*'s interpretation of Böcklin's turning away from the excesses of Romanticism). At other times the escape is rather from sexual and spiritual repression. Christian religion – and its wilful stifling of man's nature – is frequently the *bête noire* here, considered by several Symbolists to be a sort of cult of death. The exact form of this escapism varies depending on the artist in question. It is not always a matter, as *La Plume* argued of Böcklin, of turning towards a gentler and less threatening world. For some Symbolists, such as the Munich artist Franz von Stuck (1863–1920), several of whose works we consider in the chapters which follow, man's natural erotic energy and spiritedness was something to be celebrated as part of the joy of being alive. For many Symbolists, sexuality was a sort of triumph over death, and came thereby to be a symbol for life itself.

## Notes

- 1 Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 104.3 cm (Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA).
- 2 Huysmans and Howard (2009: chapter 6).
- 3 See Gibson (2006: 39).
- 4 'D'ailleurs, que l'on accepte ou que l'on repousse la théorie, n'en est-il point encore de même aujourd'hui? l'homme n'est-il pas induit aux délits et aux crimes par la femme qui est, elle-même, presque toujours perdue par sa semblable? Elle est, en somme, le grand vase des iniquités et des crimes, le charnier des misères et des hontes, la véritable introductrice des ambassades déléguées dans nos âmes par tous les vices.'
- 5 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 155.5 × 192.5 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 6 Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 208 × 264.5 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 7 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Young Girls at the Seaside*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 61 × 47 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

- 8 Gibson (2006: 56).
- 9 Henri Matisse, *Luxury, Calm, and Pleasure*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 98.5 × 118.5 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 10 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Summer*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 350 × 507 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 11 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and the Muses* 1884/89. Oil on canvas, 93 × 231 cm (Art Institute, Chicago).
- 12 'Viens respire l'odeur des vignes et des fruits.  
  
 'Ce soir te sera doux comme tes longues nuits,  
 Hymnis, enfant qui dors depuis deux mille années,  
 Et par le souffle lent des sentes où je fuis  
 Les roses du tombeau ne seront point fanées.  
  
 'Je te dédie, enfant, la mourante forêt.  
  
 'Elle se pare encor malgré son mal secret:  
 Tu te reconnaitras à sa noble agonie,  
 Vierge dont le front pâle et fiévreux se parait  
 Avec l'or éclatant et la blême ancolie.  
  
 'L'automne funéraire embaume les halliers  
  
 'Hymnis! Hymnis! Hymnis! Tes cheveux déliés,  
 Libres du bandeau frêle où tu les emprisonnes,  
 Ont frôlé des santals et des girofliers  
 Et ce sont enivrés de cruelles automnes.  
  
 'De plus calmes parfums, ce soir, te charmeront.  
  
 'Pour que ton corps sacré retourne sans affront  
 De la forêt lointaine aux ténèbres divines,  
 Je veux entrelacer à l'entour de ton front  
 Le thyrses en demi-deuil des suprêmes glycines.'
- 13 Elihu Vedder, *Rome Representative of the Arts*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 75.1 × 140.1 cm (Brooklyn Museum, New York).
- 14 'Eine meiner Kümmernisse, Lieber, ist die Polizei. An keinem Ort dieses gelobten Frankreich darf man schöne nackte Beine vor einer Bach stellen und sie zu ihrem grössten Lobe malen. Aber ich habe mir's in den Kopf gesetzt und so, vom Hasse geleitet, der mir gegen alles Gesetz und gegen alle Härmorrhoidarier eingeboren, Winkel gefunden, wo die immer vor Schlangen ängstlichen Feldgendarmen sich

nicht hintrauen, und da male ich im schönsten Lichte unter den Weiden, und die zu pflücken, sie keine Lust haben. Galateen, die den honetten Virgil erröten machten. Fugit ad Salizette!’

15 Bender (1921: 45).

16 Bender (1921: 38).

17 Ferdinand Hodler, *Day*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 160 × 352 cm (Kunstmuseum, Bern).

18 Ferdinand Hodler, *Day*, 1904/06. Oil on canvas, 163 × 358 cm (Kunsthhaus, Zürich).

19 Ferdinand Hodler, *Night*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 116 × 239 cm (Kunstmuseum, Bern).

20 ‘Cependant cette union, fruit de la conviction personnelle de certains, n’est qu’une chimère loin derrière laquelle demeure la perception bourgeoise du temps. L’acte d’amour en effet est considéré par la morale de cette époque non comme l’expérience d’une communion entre l’homme et la femme, mais comme l’expérience d’un plaisir qui, suscité chez l’homme par la femme, l’arrache au conscient et l’entraîne dans un précipice. La femme se trouve ainsi face à l’homme comme un être différent et incompréhensible qui peut l’élever à des hauteurs considérables mais aussi bien l’anéantir.’

21 ‘“Le coeur a ses raisons”, il les a, il les poursuit, il délibère en nous selon des lois secrètes infiniment mystérieuses, si bien qu’à l’occasion d’une rencontre de femme – rencontre fortuite – il s’empare de la personne entière, c’est la domination, un envahissement, une défaillance obscure où l’on ne discerne plus très bien ce que c’est la conduite, où la notion du bien et du mal n’est plus, ou n’est plus nécessaire, parce que ce qui est du coeur à cet instant divin est alors quelque chose de l’éternité.’

22 ‘Singulier artiste! Car la moralité ou l’immoralité, qu’est-ce que ça peut lui faire? Il est un contemplateur des hommes, de tous les hommes, de la vie, de toute la vie. Telle vertu parait à ses regards, il l’admire; tel vice, il l’admire encore. Est-il en face d’un être de justice et de pureté? Il le considère avec exaltation, – mais un instant après il considérera avec une exaltation aussi passionnée la figure contraire: un être fourbe et méchant. Les deux l’intéressent, lui saisissent l’esprit. Ils éveillent chacun en lui quelque chose de sa vie à lui, de la vie humaine; chacun le plonge dans des réflexions émouvantes. Aspects différents de l’humanité, de la pensée, de la beauté, ils l’enivrent et l’inspirent.’

23 See Lemonnier (1908: 44).

24 ‘Ich kann übrigens nur nach der Natur arbeiten, versuche ganz blöde und simpel das zu geben, was ich mit meinen Nerven fühle und mit meinen Augen sehe – das ist meine ganze Aesthetik, die ich zu praktizieren versuche, und ich finde das schon verflucht schwierig für mich. Talent hab ich noch keines, bekomme es aber vielleicht mit der Kraft des Willens und der Geduld.’

- 25 'Paris, das ist doch die beste Stadt der Welt, darin zu leben und zu sterben. Seit dem Kriege stand da eine ganze junge Generation von Künstlern und Dichtern auf. Leute, die während der Belagerung fünfzehn alt waren, und den Teufel und die Teufelin im Leib haben. Das alles ist lustig, amüsant, voll Bewegung, und die Frauen sind hier hübscher als je. Paris packt mich und mein Auge verfolgt verliebt die schwarzen Näschen der kleinen Schuhe unter den Wolken der Jupons, was man nur hier sieht. . . Man lebt hier vielleicht zu viel mit dem Kopf, aber anderswo zu viel mit Bauch und Unterleib.'
- 26 'Ich kenne fast alle meine Weiber und liess sie mir in den Toiletten stehen, um der Wahrheit näher zu kommen. Du weisst, ich bin ganz vergessen auf das moderne Leben und glaube, dass, will man es malen, man es dort aufsuchen muss, wo es sich in stärkster Intensität zeigt, in London oder in Paris, und man muss mit dem englischen Leben auf dem laufenden bleiben, um London zu verstehen.'
- 27 Félicien Rops, *The Lady with the Pig/Pornocrates/Pornocratie*, 1878. Watercolour, pastel and gouache highlights on paper, 75 × 48 cm (Félicien Rops Provincial Museum, Namur).
- 28 In an 1879 letter to Maurice Bonvoisin, Rops gave his own description of the work as follows: 'The picture represents a large female nude quarter turned towards us, set against a dark blue sky dotted with stars and where three cupids – 3 cupids! – with wings spread fly away escaping from the blindfolded woman, who is led on blindly by a pig. It's entitled, "Pornocratie". Under the frieze little geniuses of the Fine Arts curl up, groaning! The head! The woman is dressed in black gloves and stockings.' ('Le dessin représente une grande femme nue, quart nature, se détachant sur un ciel bleu foncé parsemé d'étoiles et où des amours – 3 amours! volent en s'enfuyant, à tire d'ailes, la femme, les yeux bandés est conduite en aveugle par un cochon. C'est intitulé – Pornocratie – Sous la frise les petits génies des beaux Arts courbent – en gémissant!! la tête!! La femme est chaussée & gantée de noir'). Available online at: [www.ropslettres.be](http://www.ropslettres.be) (accessed 13 May 2019).
- 29 'In Paris – *coups de Paris!* – hatte ich Gelegenheit, die schwarzen, rotgeblühten Seidenstrümpfe eines schönen Mädchens zu sehen, deren Geliebter in Monaco ist. Ich habe sie nackt gemalt wie eine Göttin, zog lange schwarze Handschuhe über diese schönen schmalen Hände, die ich seit drei Jahren küsse, coiffierte sie mit einem dieser grossen Gainsboroughs in schwarzen goldgeschmückten Samt, die den Mädchen neuerer Zeit diese träge Würde der Frauen aus dem siebenzehnten Jahrhundert geben – und meine "Pornokratie" war fertig. Ich bin ganz weg von dieser Zeichnung. Sie hat fast die gleichen Dimensionen wie die "Versuchung", und ich machte sie in vier Tagen in einem überhitzten Salon, blauer Satin, voller Parfüms, wo mir das Oppoponax und das Zykamen ein für die Arbeit heilsames kleines Fieber gaben. Ob das jemand kauft? Aber das ist egal.'

- 30 'Le seul qui, dans la plèbe des crayonnistes, soit apte à formuler les synthèses du frontispice dont il demeure l'unique maître, le seul surtout qui soit de taille à réaliser une oeuvre dans laquelle se résume le passif de l'éternel Vice.'
- 31 'Des êtres d'exception, qui retournent sur les pas des siècles et se jettent, par dégoût des promiscuités qu'il leur faut subir dans . . . les tumultueux espaces des cauchemars et des rêves . . . Tout le monde sait, en effet, que la continence engendre des pensées libertines et affreuses, que l'homme non chrétien et par conséquent involontairement pur, se surchauffe dans la solitude surtout, et s'exalte et divague; alors, il va mentalement, dans son rêve éveillé, jusqu'au bout du délire orgiaque.'
- 32 'Ich weiss nicht, wohin meine Kunst geht, ob ich im vieux oder im nouveau jeu, ob ich modern bin oder nicht. Ich weiss nur das eine, dass ich nach bestem Können ehrliche Arbeit mache . . . Ob meine Zeichnung gut oder schlecht ist, weiss ich nicht. Ich mache sie in aller Ehrlichkeit, das ist alles. Ich arbeite wie ein Benedikter.'
- 33 Félicien Rops, *The Beautiful Peacock*, undated. Soft-ground etching, 12.5 × 15.9 cm (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).
- 34 See Ramiro (1893) and Mascha (1910) further on this work.
- 35 Félicien Rops, *Journey to the Land of the Old Gods*, undated. Pencil, pen and ink, pastel, watercolour and gouache on paper, 32 × 22 cm (private collection).
- 36 'Aber ich kann an diesem Samstag abend nicht ausgehen, ich bin nicht frei: es ist eine kleine Dame da, blond wie ein neuer Taler, die nach meiner Meinung über die Runde ihres Knies verlangt. Man kann solche Dinge nicht abschlagen, wenn man ein Künstler männlichen Geschlechts ist – man muss die Höflichkeit seines Geschlechts und seiner Kunst haben. Ich traf sie in einer römischen Villa, die ich unlängst entdeckte. Ich hatte ganz kolossalisch und zu viel Romanée 1858 getrunken: ich sah die Pappeln über ihren Wipfeln, die Türme über ihren Wetterhähnen. Sang mir unbekannte, reizende Sachen in einem aus den Umständen geborenen Dialekt, und kam solchermassen zu den Ruinen, in denen ich irgendeinen Archäologen oder Historiker vermutete, der da Trümmer pflückt, fand aber ein blondes und blaues Fräulein, das mich lächelnd fragte:
- Sie sind der Herr Octave, nicht wahr?
  - Ich bin es, war es, und werde es sein. Madame, antwortete ich unter dem Eindruck von Romanée 58. Aber für den Augenblick heisse ich Quintus Flavius und bin Centurio, römischer Offizier, damit beauftragt, blonden Fräuleins die Ceinture zu lösen.
  - Ich trage niemals eine Ceinture, mein Herr!
  - Genau wie ich! Vereinen wir unsere Herzen. Ach, wenn wir uns verstünden, diese Ruinen wieder zu bevölkern!



- ‘Wir verstanden uns. Sie ist eine Erzieherin en rupture de bancs, die eine Stelle sucht und aus dem dörflchen Schloss stammt. Ich sah ihr rundes Knie, wie es im Lied heisst, und werde es in Brüssel widersehen. Sie ist hübsch wie ein Fragonard und hat Grübschen auch auf dem Rücken. Achtzehn Jahre! Was will man mehr von den Göttern!’
- 37 Salome, the daughter of Herodias.
- 38 ‘Priape, la Luxure, devenue plus tard un péché chrétien, se symbolisa dans la danse carnassière des Hériodiades. Puis elle livra, comme des terres arables, au vieil Herseur de péchés, l’âme éperdue des Saints, supplicia dans leurs thébaïdes les solitaires, dévergonda, pendant des siècles, la pudeur résolue des cloîtres.’
- 39 Félicien Rops, *Weird Women* (French: *Les Diaboliques*), 1882. Nine colour illustrations.
- 40 Huysmans (1908: 116) considered d’Aureville to be a primary influence on the Satanism of Rops’ work as a whole.
- 41 ‘La femme se glisse, nue, enlace le col de la bête, se hausse à son oreille et, tout bas, la supplie de lui révéler enfin le surnaturel secret des jouissances inrêvées et des péchés neufs. Vicieuse et câline, elle frotte ses chairs contre le granit du monstre, tente de le séduire, s’offre à lui comme à l’homme dont elle voudrait extirper l’argent, reste fille, même transportée dans cette scène hors du monde, même magnifiée par cette inquitte nudité de déesse ou d’Eve.’
- 42 Klinger (1885: 12) idolized Dürer for the primacy he accorded drawing: ‘He knew that true colours would destroy even the most spiritual world, and that of all the arts only drawing had something in common with art and poetry.’ (‘Er weiss, dass die wirkliche Farbe eben jene geistige Welt zerstören würde, welche von allen Künsten die Zeichnung allein mit der Kunst und Poesie gemein hat.’)
- 43 Max Klinger, *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove*, 1878. Ten etchings on thick laid paper (published 1881).
- 44 As Lombardi and Arnone (2009: 170) summarize: ‘a lady’s glove found at a skating rink undergoes several dreamlike transformations in the artist’s mind, commemorating the nameless owner and becoming a symbol for the ten stages of anguish and desire’. See further on this work: Klinger et al. (1977), Hertel (1992) and Holloway and Zdanowicz (1981).
- 45 Most notably from the German art critic Julius Meier-Gräfe (1867–1935).
- 46 See Gibson (2006: 125).
- 47 ‘Ein ruhender menschlicher Körper, an dem das Licht in irgend einem Sinne hingeleitet, in dem nur Ruhe und keinerlei Gemütsbewegung ausgedrückt sein soll, ist, vollendet gemalt, schon ein Bild, ein Kunstwerk. Die “Idee” liegt für den Künstler in der Stellung des Körpers entsprechenden Formentwicklung, in seinem Verhältnis zum Raum, in seinen Farbkombinationen, und es ist ihm völlig

gleichgiltig, ob dies Endymion oder Peter ist. Für den Künstler reicht diese Idee aus, und sie reicht aus! Unser Tagesgeschmack verlangt aber vorest genau zu wissen, ob das nicht etwa Endymion ist.' Footnote: 'Ich bin überzeugt, dass alle jene unvermeidlichen hübschen Mädchenköpfe – Ada – Hermine – Lydia – der illustrierten Blätter vollständig verschwinden würden, wenn Eigennamen nicht mehr darunter gesetzt werden dürften. Ich habe beobachtet, dass ein solches, in einem Blatt nur "Studie" gennantes Gesicht einen Kunstfreund ganz kalt liess, aber als "Kläre" in einem anderen volles Interesse abgewann.'

48 Max Klinger, *The Blue Hour*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 191.5 × 176 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig).

49 Max Klinger, *Amphitrite*, 1895–99. Marble sculpture, h. 178 cm, w. 47 cm, d. 42 cm (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin).

50 See my discussion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* in Warren (2017: 44).

51 Max Klinger, *Brahms Fantasy*, 1894. Forty-one engravings in etching and aquatint.

52 Max Klinger, *Opus II: Rescues of Ovid's Victims* (Title page: 'Evocation') (13 prints), 1879. Etching and aquatint, 23.3 × 37.1 cm (Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Strasbourg).

53 Elihu Vedder, *The Artist's Lesson, or Captive Cupid*, c. 1875–80. (Location unknown).

54 Elihu Vedder, *The Pleiades*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 61.3 × 95.6 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

55 Leonardo Bistolfi, *The Song of Love*, 1905–08. Sculpture in plaster, 61 × 119 × 11 cm (Museo Civico e Gipsoteca Bistolfi, Casale Monferrato).

56 Arnold Böcklin, *Abandoned Venus*, c. 1860. Oil on canvas, 119 × 94 cm (Kunstmuseum, Basel).

57 See also Lucie-Smith (2001: 157): 'Böcklin was . . . very much in thrall to the Classical dream which played so significant a part in the German culture of the nineteenth century. In 1850, he made his first journey to Italy, staying there till 1852, and returning in 1853 to stay until 1857.'

58 'L'art et la pensée de son temps qui ont glorifié trop l'énergie brute l'angoissaient. Les bonnes âmes se sont détournées du spectacle de la rue et sont allées dans le passé chercher des indications. On a voulu comme autrefois avoir la bonne gaieté, le rire franc, et l'amitié des dieux.

'Les philologues – ces ascètes modernes – sont partis pour explorer Rome et l'Hellade. Ils voulaient aimer de nouveau les bosquets sacrés et les nymphes des bois.

'La brutalité de la force naturelle ne suffisait pas. On avait faim des nourritures spirituelles et on craignait le banal idéalisme, viellot et usé.

'Or la Grèce avec ses mythes, avec ses dieux peu terrifiants, si humains, reposait des violences de l'énergie barbare qu'exagérait la volonté chrétienne.

‘Boecklin aussi se tourna vers la terre attique. Les satyres, les nymphes, les boucs divins – ces exagérations de la vigueur humaine – l’ont tenté.

‘En Italie il a connu le ciel et le sourire. Il a rêvé Bacchus et ses ébats, les rires des Silènes, les troublantes grâces des Sirènes.

‘Avec les couleurs éclatantes, blessantes parfois – avec la gaucherie d’amoureux il a peint les paysages et les dieux. Cependant le sang du vigoureux Suisse était parfois blessé par les aimables éblats.

‘Et alors il éclatait en imprécations. Sa couleur s’exaltait. Le blanc et le bleu et le rouge enveloppaient ses visions. Le ciel redevenait hérissé de menaces. La désolation soufflait à travers les arbres, la désolation et l’épouvante de l’énergie qui se sent vigoureuse et qui ne peut encore trouver le geste sobre qui convient à toute force réelle . . .

‘Mais parfois il s’attendrit! La sagesse antique, la pensive légende l’attire.’



## Part One

# The Female Body



## Aphrodite – as Object

‘Woman is our supreme annunciator.’<sup>1</sup> The French Symbolist Redon’s (1922: 51) words could not have summed it up better. Woman was the primary fascination for the Symbolists, at once object of desire, danger and most profound mystery.<sup>2</sup>

In the following three chapters we consider how the Symbolists transformed the female Greek body. We first look at one aspect of that transformation: how woman was sexually objectified. The title of this chapter reflects the fact that, in the process of that objectification, the Symbolists found no greater ally than Greek myth. In Aphrodite, and her fellow goddesses and nymphs of ancient Greece, the Symbolists had a ready-made metaphor for a certain erotic ideal. This was woman unveiled, in all her natural beauty and splendour; woman unchained, without the stifling trappings of the modern world, mental or physical; and woman untamed, whose sexual power was unquestionable, ineluctable and eternal.

A simple, but profoundly important, point must be made here. All of the Symbolist artists whose works we consider in this book were men. The Venuses, Dianas and nymphs whom we will encounter are the product of their imaginations, and their receptions of classical art and myth. While Symbolist art often presents an image of woman as sexually alluring and powerful, it is consistently the product of a *male* Symbolist imagination. There is great variety in the ways in which the Symbolists used classical art and myth to frame their ideals of womanhood. The point need not be laboured, but all share this basic characteristic of being predominantly the sexual narrative of a male artist – even if this was not exclusively a heterosexual one. As we will see, this affects both artists’ mythological interests, and the ways in which the classics are transformed in Symbolist art.

The choice of the term ‘unveiling’ above is not accidental. There was a strong sense among many Symbolists, whether or not historically accurate,<sup>3</sup> that

earlier – particularly medieval Christian – art, had covered the Greek body, unjustly concealing its true beauty and form. As we have seen in our discussion of Klinger in the previous chapter, whether rightly or wrongly this helped to encourage the perception that the body and its native eroticism had been free in ancient art, and that the path to the body's liberation in art therefore lay in a return to the classics. But this would not be a return of the false sort that for the Symbolists and many of their contemporaries characterized Academicism. A rediscovery of the true, uncompromising, meaning of classical art and myth was needed. The veil of Neoclassicism and Academicism needed to be lifted, styles which had – in the view of the Symbolists – through a conceited, and at times hypocritical, sense of morality divested them of their sexuality. This found a particular focus in the female body, whose warmth the Symbolists wanted to rediscover, to rekindle, in Greek marble, become so cold and lifeless after centuries of neglect.

A work by Rops excellently summarizes the Symbolist desire for such a rediscovery. *The Moulding*<sup>4</sup> (1878–81) is a satirical play on this artistic quest made literal. The illustration belongs to a series entitled 'Cent légers croquis sans prétention pour réjouir les honnêtes gens' ('One Hundred Unpretentious Sketches to Entertain Honest Folk') (1878–81). The series consists of 112 drawings in two albums, commissioned by the French book collector, and Rops admirer, Jules Nouilly. It was intended to satirize contemporary sexual mores by demonstrating the various ways in which women used their sexuality. *The Moulding* depicts a nude young female model lying on a slab of stone in an artist's atelier. An older, bearded man leans over her, applying plaster from a bowl to her torso. The artist's assistant stands beside them looking on, holding up a piece of cloth with one hand and smoking a pipe with the other. A number of Neoclassical sculptures, reliefs, masks and mouldings, including female torsos, surround the figures. As so often in Rops' work, he makes explicit an implicit association between art, sexuality and the classics, something that had frequently been present – but rarely directly expressed – in Academicism. With his penchant for satire, Rops comments on the ridiculousness and inherent perversity of the Academic attempt to realize that association. We are left with a number of questions. What is the purpose of this moulding? Will it end up as another fine – but ultimately inane – addition to the existing collection of mouldings and sculpture? And why this determination to cast



from life? We cannot help but feel that there is something flawed both in the attempt to find the Greek body in the flesh, and in the attempt to better nature in marble. Rops only prompts these questions for the purpose of comic reflection, but this work also belies an unspoken Symbolist criticism of how Academicism had tried in vain to realize the sexuality of the Greek body, and suggests that the Symbolists would seek to remedy that failure in their art. Something of an obsession for certain of their number, we will see later how the Pygmalion and Galatea myth became a focus for achieving the ideal.

We have already touched on the work of Moreau, in the context of discussing Huysmans' reception of *Salome*. Moreau's art is central to this study because it reinvents the Greek body not only in female and male forms, but also as sexual other, and we therefore consider his paintings in all three parts of this book. Moreau's brand of dreamy orientalism became iconic in his day and is easily recognizable. As contemporary commentators Laran and Deshairs (1913: 10–12) summarized:

He loves the strange and the faraway. History itself is too close for him. He lives in fable, in myths. Among the heroes, it is the most mysterious which haunt him: those who question and brave the monsters; the unconscious instruments of destiny: Helen, Salome. He creates Chimeras. When it does not betake itself to the most obscure past, his imagination traverses a marvellous Orient where he is careful not to tread, lest it become real to him.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned already, Moreau was heavily influenced by certain early Renaissance artists,<sup>6</sup> most notably Mantegna,<sup>7</sup> but was also an admirer of Michelangelo (1475–1564), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and Théodore Chassériau (1819–56) – all of whose influences can be found in the large body of his extant work. This comprises over a thousand oil and watercolour paintings and five thousand drawings, mainly preserved in the Musée Gustave Moreau, the artist's former home at 14 Rue de la Rochefoucauld in Paris. Moreau was himself very well read and had an extensive knowledge of ancient sculpture, acquired from both direct study and books of engravings. He had travelled to Italy on the Grand Tour in 1857–59 with the painter Frédéric de Courcy to conduct artistic research for the purpose of reinvigorating History Painting. Moreau's time in Italy included a period in Rome studying classical sculpture

and Renaissance fresco. He then went to Florence and Venice before returning again to Rome in 1859, where he made a large copy of Poussin's *The Death of Germanicus*<sup>8</sup> (1628). Moreau subsequently spent time making copies of sculptures and murals from the Borbonico Museum, as well as those of Michelangelo, and measuring the dimensions of ancient sculpture with the French sculptor Henri Chapu (1833–91).<sup>9</sup> Returning to Paris, he collected casts and photographs of famous classical and Renaissance sculptures.<sup>10</sup> Despite its potentially controversial homoeroticism, the classicizing subject matter of his work ensured that it retained academic respectability,<sup>11</sup> leading to a teaching position at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1892 to 1898, during which time he was influential for many of his students (who included Matisse (1869–1954) and Georges Rouault (1871–1958)).<sup>12</sup>

Moreau's impact on his Symbolist contemporaries was profound.<sup>13</sup> Alongside those of Böcklin, his paintings, with their heavily classical inspiration, were key in shaping the reception of the classics by younger artists (André Breton, the founder of literary Surrealism, opined that Moreau's genius lay in his manner of giving new life to Biblical and classical myths). On his return to Paris in 1864, Moreau exhibited his *Oedipus and the Sphinx*<sup>14</sup> (1864) (Figure 9, see discussion below) at the Salon, a work which won him considerable success and inspired many later Symbolists.<sup>15</sup> Several artists found in Moreau's work a welcome departure from the stultified classical receptions of the Neoclassicists. Indeed Huysmans (1908: 15–16), no fan of Puvis' Academicism and in particular of his painting *Autumn*<sup>16</sup> (1864), found a favourable comparison in Moreau:

But if Mr Puvis de Chavanne has of occasion exhibited some not overly shabby panels, some almost fresh canvases; we should not however claim that he has brought a new accent into art . . . This unending panel seems to me the presumptuous gala of an ancient failure, like a slow and frozen work, laborious and false. It was the work of a cunning clown, of a gourmand ascetic, of a waking Lendore; it was also the work of an untiring labourer who, working amidst the articles entrusted to the sires of art, could be reputed a wise man and sage master if the witless emphasis of fashionable criticism did not strive to proclaim him a great original artist and great poet. Comparing Mr Puvis and Mr Gustave Moreau, to put them together – as far as concerns their refinement – to confuse them in one single box of

admiration, is truly to commit one of the most servile heresies that can be. Mr Gustave Moreau has rejuvenated the greasy old subjects with a talent at once subtle and great; he has taken up the myths worn out by the vagaries of the centuries and has expressed them in a superb and persuasive language, mysterious and quite new. From separate elements he has managed to create a style which is now his own. Mr Puvis de Chavanne didn't know how to create anything.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 9** Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – bequest of William H. Herriman, 1920.

Huysmans was utterly taken with Moreau's women. We have seen above how he characterized Des Esseintes' reaction to *Salome*. He continues (1908: 18) by summarizing the various types of woman that Moreau presented, explaining them in terms of Moreau's retreat from the vulgarity of the real world around him:

Goddesses astride hippogriffs and radiating out from the stones of their wings the agony of female nudes; feminine idols, with crowns, upright on their thrones on stairs submerged by extraordinary flowers, or sat in rigid poses on elephants – elephants whose brows are adorned with green, by gates of chased Orfrey seamed as cavalry bells, with long pearls . . . One understood still better the work of Gustave Moreau, outside of its time, fleeing into the beyond, hovering in the dream, far from the excremental ideas secreted by a whole people.<sup>18</sup>

Only a few years after he first exhibited his *Oedipus and the Sphinx* Moreau effectively withdrew from the public eye, no longer exhibiting (though we should by no means assume that this meant that he became socially disengaged or a recluse – as his teaching demonstrates). But Moreau's work, and the women that he created, do – as Huysmans suggested – indicate his flight to another world. For Moreau the women that inhabited that other world were in some ways more real than those of the world outside.

Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, features repeatedly in Moreau's work (see Figure 10 for a typical representation). We begin by considering his *The Birth of Venus* (or *Venus Appearing to the Fishermen*)<sup>19</sup> (1866). Originally related by Hesiod (*Theogony* 188–200), the myth told of how Aphrodite was born from the sea after the Titan Cronus threw the severed genitals of his father Uranus into the ocean.<sup>20</sup> The artist's several versions of the mythological narrative derive from his admiration for Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*<sup>21</sup> (c. 1485). Moreau had been in Florence in September 1858 with the French Impressionist painter Edgar Degas (1834–1917), who had wanted to show him Botticelli's *Spring*<sup>22</sup> (c. 1477–82), but he had been more taken with the *Venus*, of which he immediately made a small copy. Several preparatory studies and paintings on the theme of Venus followed, before the more fully worked-up version we consider here. The painting, which closely references both Hesiod's original telling of the tale and Botticelli's reception of it, might be thought of as an intermediate work between the subject's Academic treatment (such as those of



**Figure 10** Gustave Moreau, *Aphrodite*. Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum – bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.

Delacroix or Chassériau), and more truly Symbolist versions of the theme (such as those of Redon).

In the painting we see the nude Venus stepping from the ocean onto the shore, a beautiful young woman with long blonde hair. Unlike Botticelli's Venus she appears to the observer side on, her face in profile and body at quarter-turn towards us. Her build takes after the Praxitelean statues of which she is a descendant (if somewhat more slender than the *Aphrodite of Knidos* herself). Moreau, however, maintains the waist-length flowing hair of Botticelli's goddess, even if she appears less windswept. As in that model, her weight also rests on her left leg as her right trails behind her, lending her the impression more of floating on the waves light as air than dredging through the waters. Moreau slightly varies the positioning of her arms from that of Botticelli (and Praxiteles). It is now her left arm rather than her right that is raised

to her chest, dropping absently rather than actively concealing her breasts. Similarly her right arm trails behind her figure, her open palm and outstretched fingers compositionally mirroring the line of her right leg. Unlike Praxiteles' and Botticelli's models, Moreau's Venus makes no attempt to conceal her genitalia. The fine features of her face, which retain the expressionless quality of a Greek marble, are absolutely typical of Moreau's androgynous ideal of beauty. We will encounter this again and again in both his heroines and his heroes.

To the right of the composition a group of fishermen kneel in a huddled group before the approaching Venus. It is immediately clear that they have recognized her divinity, and Moreau depicts them in various acts of supplication. At the upper left of the group one fisherman looks up at the goddess, stretching out his hands towards her in prayer. This is mirrored by another figure below, who is entirely bent over with his face downwards, praying hands similarly stretched out towards the goddess' legs, and two further figures behind also depicted in acts of prayer. A figure above in a red tunic and Phrygian cap has his face penitently downcast, as if he is not worthy of looking directly upon the majesty of the goddess. Below him another fisherman with a large shaggy beard is bent over, but this time looks up at Venus, a look of fear and awe in his eyes. In the foreground another young man in a red cap has knelt down to pray, his eyes closed as he averts his gaze from the goddess. Behind the fishermen we see the rocks of the shore and the hulk of their ship, whose prow the artist has fancifully decorated. A deep-blue sea and bloodshot sky beyond frame the figure of the goddess.

The colour scheme of Moreau's oils lends the whole scene a golden tinge, but nothing is so bright as the radiant figure of Venus herself, her pale flesh and blonde hair shot through with gold. At once delicate and powerful, it is as if she lights up all else in the painting. Moreau's removal of the additional figures in Botticelli's composition and inclusion instead of the group of penitent fishermen increase both the focus on her figure itself and the sense that we are witness to a religious epiphany. Venus undoubtedly remains an object of sexual desire. Yet by employing the artistic iconography of Christian penitence in his depiction of the sailors, even if the subject itself is pagan, Moreau lends the classical myth an unconventional seriousness. This is an original approach to depicting the classical goddess of love, in which Moreau encapsulates well one

broader aspect of the Symbolist reception of the classical goddess and nymph as object of desire. This is effectively the transposition of religious mystery to a new subject, man's sexuality – his erotic soul, as it were. Like the fishermen, we should not just fear the erotic but venerate it too.

In a slightly earlier treatment of the myth of the same year, also but less obviously inspired by Botticelli, Moreau presents his subject more hieratically and symbolically. His *Venus Rising from the Sea*<sup>23</sup> (1866) depicts the goddess in a very different light, sat upon a rocky throne which emerges out of the dark waters of the ocean. Her right leg rigid and her left knee raised, she outstretches both arms horizontally as she ceremonially holds up the long locks of her blonde hair, which trail down to the water behind and beside her. She turns her crowned head to the right, her expression stately and royal. Flanking her below and depicted in profile, a female and male Triton emerge from the water offering gifts from the sea. Their hieratic posing also supports the impression that we are looking at a religious icon rather than a mythological painting. Venus is herself the same physical type of a slender young female nude, somewhat androgynous, with long blonde hair. She is framed against a backdrop of black rocks, beyond which we see a moody bluish-black and gold sunrise or sunset. While differing in composition, both works are typical of Moreau's style. His Venuses are beautiful, but also sure in their power and made distant by their divinity. As more generally of the artist's gods, Venus may appear human in her physical form, but her appearance leaves the observer in no doubt of her godhead. The goddess may be beautiful, but she is not only something to be admired; she is something to be held in awe. Moreau infuses his Venuses with the full reverence in which the Symbolists held the erotic, and its ineluctability.

Moreau was not the only Symbolist fascinated by the myth of Venus' birth. Redon also frequently returned to the theme in his painting. We have already encountered the artist, but it is worth a few further introductory remarks by way of context before we consider his articulation of the female nude. Redon's artistic training in the 1860s combined Bordeaux and Paris, where an early meeting with Delacroix made a great and lasting impression. During this time the artist spent long periods both studying ancient works in Bordeaux, and copying masterpieces in the Louvre. Redon was also influenced by the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) and the French engraver

Rodolphe Bresdin (1822–85), under whom he studied for a time. He was close to many Symbolist writers, penning articles for the Symbolist journal *La Gironde* and exhibiting in the Salon des Indépendants ('Salon of the Independents') in 1884. Redon (1922: 17) felt that he owed a lot to his artistic training in Bordeaux, and to his first art tutor there in particular: 'It was thus that I was able to see the works of Millet, Corot, Delacroix, the beginnings of Gustave Moreau.'<sup>24</sup> Redon (1922: 62) was a great admirer of Moreau, describing him as, 'an artist who does not have and will never have all the fame that he deserves'. The two artists have traditionally been grouped together, largely as a result of Huysmans having encouraged this in his writing, where his Des Esseintes – as well as purchasing Moreau's paintings – also buys a number of Redon's charcoal drawings. Some commentators lament this fact, given the unfortunate tendency it has encouraged to elide the significant differences in the work of the two artists.<sup>25</sup>

Redon was greatly inspired by the classics, as emerges clearly from his works – so much so that he even complains in his memoirs (1922: 13) that his educational syllabus at school had not contained enough Latin! More generally the artist was highly sensible to history, landscape and mythology, something we for example see in his description of the Médoc region of France:

One could say that in the Celtic air a long depository of humanity has accumulated, full of the days and times gone by, as a spirit of things, and of legend too. She sings her songs, which are the substance itself of a whole people, of its past, of its genius, the permanent evocation of its sufferings and desires.<sup>26</sup>

This passage is instructive for what it reveals about Redon's spiritual approach to the past, including the classical past. Such an understanding of history, less interested in fact and written record than in the collective memories of a people, is characteristic of the Symbolists in general but emerges particularly strongly in his work. It is most obvious in the landscape settings of the works of Redon's 'colour' period, many of which provide the backdrop for his retelling of classical myths. The – at times almost psychedelic – colours that frame his figures seem to capture in paint this visionary understanding of a landscape of myth and memory. The ideas that underpinned this conception are challenging to pin down precisely, but it is telling that Redon (1922: 35) defined



art as ‘sublime communion with all the soul of the past’, and as the ‘grand inheritance of deceased humanity’. This should not be misconstrued as something morbid, given that for Redon (1922: 119) death was itself ‘mistress and eternally sovereign’.

Redon’s discussion of the work of two artists he greatly admired who in turn engaged heavily with classical myth, Delacroix and Moreau, are very revealing of his own approach. In both cases he is little inspired by the Academic aspects of their treatment of myth. Writing in 1878, Redon (1922: 165) outlined his belief that Delacroix had erred in his earlier work in catering to the tastes of the official Salon, only later finding his true personal direction:

The master continued to cling to the past in his classical attachments. The mode of representation is essentially formal, plastic; he advances by means of flat surfaces; he models, he studies the relief of things. The line is upheld; the arrangement is almost sober ... Some years later and he would understand that Dante and the Latin world were not the way for him; he no longer returns thither, the awareness is deafening that his muscles will bear him no further on that path, that it just wouldn’t be enough, and that soon he would abandon himself to his essentially nervous nature, to pure expression, to the representation of interior life alone and would not even seek to struggle in sculpture, with the ancient masters who surpassed him, and he understood at last that his era is an era of pure expression, that romanticism is no more than the triumph of feeling over form, and without second thoughts or regrets, he entered into his true path, that of expressive colour, of colour that one could call moral.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed Redon (1922: 167) goes further still, defining precisely what he favours about Delacroix’s depiction of the classical gods:

He paints each detail with the meaning that is particular to it. Venus is surrounded by a tender blue; in an exquisitely tender cloud of grey, the cupids fly about and spread their oriental wings. Ceres has all the poetry of our most beautiful landscapes, lit up by the sun. Mercury expresses in his red cape all the splendour of commerce and wellbeing. Mars is a terrible violet, his helmet of a bitter red, symbol of war. The painter expresses everything through his attributes ... The attribute which defines each god becomes useless in the measure that colour is responsible for saying all and the right expression; the rest of tradition which he still retains, for clarity, is useless.<sup>28</sup>

Discussing the standard Symbolist attributes of ‘masks, snaky monsters, severed heads, *femmes fatales*, new interpretations of Classical mythology’, Lucie-Smith (2001: 78) has spoken of how, in Redon’s case, ‘what matters is the very personal way in which they are interpreted’. As we will see, the strong individuality of his interpretation of the Greek body in mythological contexts is often to be found in his subtle and effective use of colour to create mood. Naturally, then, this book focuses more on the paintings of Redon’s colour period, rather than his (generally better-known) *noirs*, the corpus of his more melancholic and at times disturbing charcoal drawings. From one standpoint these respective phases of the artist’s development might be mapped onto a sort of personal mythical geography, which strongly associated the colour, joy and light of classical mythology with the Mediterranean, in contrast to the inherent moroseness of more northern climes.<sup>29</sup> But it is clear from his above description of Delacroix’s work that Redon also found direct inspiration for his colour period in that artist’s paintings and interpretation of the Greek body.

Redon’s (1922: 63) admiration for Moreau, reflecting his distaste for Academicism, is also indicative of his preferences in painting myth:

I defy you, if you have at all entered beneath the so very cold vaults of the Academic temple, to find therein a spirit who thus rejuvenates antiquity with a freedom so complete and in form at once so restrained and so vehement. This master has never once since the beginning left the legends of pagan antiquity behind, and ceaselessly presents them in a new light. It is that his vision is modern, essentially and profoundly; it is that he gives in unresistingly to the directions of his own nature.<sup>30</sup>

The key word here is ‘rejuvenate’ (*rajeunisse*). Redon clearly shared Moreau’s desire to renew Greek myth. An emblematic example of where he did so – and very much in his own way – was his transformation of the female nude in his *The Birth of Venus* (1912) (Figure 1). Treating the same mythological episode that Moreau had several decades earlier, and also primarily following Hesiod’s account, Redon nonetheless took a very different approach to its representation. The focus is now entirely on the body of Venus herself. Redon has foregone all of the ‘useless’ attributes he believes Delacroix could have done without. And in so doing he maximizes the potential of colour itself as a symbol to express the power of the myth of love’s birth.

We see the newly born goddess rising fully grown from the ocean. Her arms raised above her head, poised on her right leg as she floats upwards weightlessly, her towering and radiant form seems to fill the entire composition. In modelling the posture of her body, Redon has clearly drawn inspiration from the ancient sculpture the *Aphrodite Anadyomene* ('Aphrodite Rising from the Ocean') (Figure 4), which was known in several Hellenistic marbles. While many of these only exist today in fragmentary form, they all clearly indicate an original composition in which the goddess lifts one of her arms as she rises from the sea. Redon allows a primary focus on this positioning of her body by limiting the detail of her facial features and not highlighting them. Yet in a departure from both Botticelli and Moreau this now faces away from us, her upper body pivoting back towards us at quarter-turn. Her prominent black outline emphasizes the curvature of her figure, and her overpowering sexuality. Beneath Venus is the great sea-shell from which she has arisen, appearing like a giant womb. This is a wash of red and purple, as are the other sea coral that surround her lower body, offsetting her figure. In the upper half of the composition Redon has painted a pastel sky shot through with a wondrous array of colours – white, blue, purple and russet brown – chosen to highlight the gold of Venus' own body to greatest effect. Above her head, which is framed by a bright cloud, a dab of white paint indicates the evening star, sign of the goddess in the night sky. The divine birth of love.

As argued in the introduction, this painting is utterly emblematic of the concerns of this book, encapsulating the Symbolist quest to recreate the female nude of Greek sculpture. But it also summarizes well the Symbolist transformation of ancient sculpture as a whole. At one level, Redon's *Venus* is another descendant of Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* (Figure 2). Transmitted via and modified by Botticelli, Delacroix and Moreau, the essential form and lissom perfection of Praxiteles' original is nonetheless still recognizable. Yet at another level, this was no longer that original, or any other Venus that had been seen before. In that truly Symbolist rebirth of the Greek nude, which – as we will see in this chapter and those which follow – we can witness happening between Moreau's earlier and Redon's later versions of the birth-of-Venus myth (which were each depicted several times<sup>31</sup>), Venus has taken on a whole new life and acquired a whole new level of – specifically Symbolist – erotic connotation.



**Figure 11** Odilon Redon, *Pandora*. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – bequest of Alexander M. Bing, 1959.

Other works of Redon's from his colour period, depicting the women of Greek myth, belie a similar conception of the female Greek nude as perfect harmony of form – a harmony the artist conveys in a like synesthetic resplendence of colour. His *Pandora*<sup>32</sup> (1914) (Figure 11) depicts the myth of its eponymous heroine, who according to Hesiod was the first woman created

by the gods, a punishment for humanity for the Titan Prometheus' theft of fire. Having been given an array of gifts by the gods, Pandora opened the famous 'box' (or more correctly jar, in Hesiod) containing all the evils of the world, letting them escape, save for hope, which remained inside.<sup>33</sup> The artist depicted the myth several times in other similar compositions,<sup>34</sup> part of a series of paintings of beautiful heroines from Greek myth. Despite the myth's inherently ambiguous nature and possible alternative interpretations, the tradition of earlier centuries had tended to see Pandora as allegorizing the danger and evil of women.

Given the penchant of Redon's Symbolist contemporaries for such a characterization of women (see next chapter), we might have expected him to follow suit here. However, it is not immediately clear that Redon does so. Compositionally, the painting is entirely focused on Pandora herself, providing an intimate portrait of the mythological heroine. He paints her as a standing nude, a slender and seductive young woman, at quarter-turn towards us and with her weight poised on one leg (again, the originally Praxitelean influence is clear). Her head is bent down as she contemplates the box in her hands, which she appears already to have opened. Redon half-shades in mauve the side of her body turned away from us, as well as the box itself, in keeping with the overall colour scheme of the painting, while her face (in profile) and the remainder of her naked flesh is a cream colour. The rest of the painting surrounding her figure is a great medley of colour, out of which burst what appear to be bright flowers of all hues, shapes and sizes. Above her head spreads the bark of a white tree, set against a hazy yet bright blue sky, while beneath her feet the earth is gold. Immediately around her body, apparently emanating out of the box itself and spreading into the rest of the painting, is a sort of mauve-purple haze.

Another example of Redon's masterful use of colour to convey meaning, the painting defies easy interpretation. It is clear that the artist has focused on the best-known element of Pandora's myth, relating to her opening of the box. The bright tropical flowers that surround her – if this is what they are – are clearly the manifestation of the contents of the box inside. Compositionally they focus our attention on the beautiful young Pandora, whom they seem to embower. Are these, then, all the evils of the world? The cacophony of their bright and garish colours seem somehow to forebode ill. Or has Redon rather

reimagined the evils of the myth as the sensual pleasures of the world that, once rightly understood, are not really evils at all? Is Redon suggesting that the sensuality that the nude Pandora embodies, as well as the delights she has released from the box, are actually the real gift for humanity? It is difficult to be sure, but the painting is undoubtedly intended to be a deeply psychological one. In Redon's *Pandora* we have a further example of how the Symbolists recast the female Greek nude and used her as a vehicle for reflection on and challenge to our response to the sensuality – and eroticism – of the world.

Andromeda, and her rescue by the hero Perseus, was another Greek myth which had a significant appeal for the Symbolists. As for Neoclassical artists, the story of the fair daughter of the Ethiopian king Cepheus and his wife Cassiopeia, chained to a rock naked to be savaged by a sea monster, presented another opportunity to depict the nude female form in an interesting way. Andromeda's mother, as a result of boasting that her daughter was more beautiful than the Nereid sea nymphs, had brought down on her the sea god Poseidon's curse. The myth required the artist to explore the expressive potential of the female body, as a means to convey Andromeda's distress at her impending doom and to heighten the drama of her rescue by Perseus. But for the Symbolists, as so many other Greek myths, it also had an added erotic and dramatic force, signifying at once the notions of the (often tragic) power of beauty, but – that ostensible power aside – its ultimate consumption as all in the face of death, and of defiance of death through redemption in love (Perseus). Earlier Renaissance and Baroque depictions of the myth, as those of the related legend of St George and the dragon, had focused primarily either on the latter aspect of redemption – conceived of as the heroic and virtuous struggle of Perseus, or the Christian redemption of a chaste virgin – or, in Neoclassicism, the (often Academically depicted) form of the naked Andromeda. Most tended to stop short of primarily emphasizing the myth's erotic aspects.<sup>35</sup>

In his *Andromeda*<sup>36</sup> (1904/10), which as other Greek myths the artist returned to in several subsequent compositions,<sup>37</sup> Redon did away altogether with Perseus. Instead, the emphasis is nearly entirely on Andromeda herself, with the sea monster a subordinate presence in his painting. We see her naked form stranded mid-ocean on the rock, sketched in outline. Typically of Redon, his heroine lacks the concrete detail which might risk her seeming other than a figment of our imagination. Instead she appears as a pale apparition set

against the dark brown rock behind her and the crashing white foam of the violent ocean below. She almost seems to float, her arms raised above her head and her torso in an s-curve as she springs on her right leg, her left leg raised with bent knee. She is less the pious maiden awaiting her doom, the damsel in distress, of earlier art than instead an epiphany of beauty herself who is unaware, indeed seems to exist altogether independently, of her terrifying surroundings. In addition to the jagged rock and crashing ocean, this includes the sea monster itself, a small but fearful brown mass at the lower left of Redon's composition, its awful maw gaping wide, hell-bent on consuming the fair Andromeda. But, far from showing alarm at its coming – even despite Perseus' conspicuous absence – Andromeda seems blissfully unconcerned. Rather the force of her beauty dominates the entire scene, as if its radiance has a gravity of its own, such that will inevitably trump the evil forces around her.

Moreau also depicted the myth in several paintings and preparatory drawings. In his earlier oil painting *Perseus and Andromeda*<sup>38</sup> (c. 1870–80), in the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, Moreau provides a compositionally more traditional version of the theme which we might constructively contrast with that of Redon. In the foreground we see the partially nude figure of Andromeda, sat leaning against the rock in the ocean. She still wears the crown of her royal status, as she looks down sadly at the shackle by which her right foot is chained. Her right arm, crossed over her chest, grips at another chain that binds her. In the background we see a giant serpent approaching across the sea, set against a red-golden sky where Perseus, dressed in gold with blue wings on his helmet and feet, descends to rescue Andromeda. In his hand he holds a spear and shield emblazoned with Medusa's head, which point down towards the sea monster, which looks up at him baring its jaws. A golden light emanates in the direction of the sea monster from Medusa's face, which we know will shortly petrify the fiend. Perseus himself turns his face in the direction of Andromeda, who does not yet seem to be aware of his presence.

Even if Moreau's version retains the conventional presence of the hero, while Redon's does not, both paintings remain primarily focused on the figure of Andromeda. Moreau's heroine, painted a sallow grey, is a more tragic figure than Redon's – even if the presence of the approaching Perseus suggests she will be saved. She is a part of the mythical narrative Moreau represents, responding to it. In contrast, Redon's Andromeda, despite the threat of the sea



monster and Perseus' conspicuous absence, is a far less tragic and endangered figure who exists almost independently of the mythical narrative. The change in the way Moreau and Redon depict this myth is symptomatic of the broader shift in Symbolist treatments of Greek myth, which over time display increasingly less interest in narrative and more interest in the hieratic potential of mythical figures as symbols themselves. In Moreau's painting Perseus' gaze already foreshadows that in Symbolist treatments of the theme Andromeda would herself be increasingly foremost. This is not to imply that an interest in the heroine was new in Symbolism (we might compare, for example, Titian's (1488/90–1576) treatment of the theme referenced above). But Redon's later rendition demonstrates how far this symbolic interest in the mythical hero or heroine could ultimately be taken. Consistent with his views on Delacroix's mythological painting, all other narrative elements become strictly subordinate or (in Perseus' case) are removed altogether. His depictions of Greek mythological heroines generally follow this pattern.

One artist who turned to Greek legendary history for models of the female body, in addition to myth, was the German Symbolist Stuck. In his painting *Phryne*<sup>39</sup> (1917), Stuck depicted the legend of a Greek courtesan of the fourth century BC whose story is related by the Greek author Athenaeus and others.<sup>40</sup> Phryne was reputedly the lover of many prominent men, including Praxiteles, several of whose sculptures she was believed to have inspired. When tried for impiety before the Areopagus, the Athenian court responsible for capital charges, she was defended by one of her lovers, the orator Hypereides (390–322 BC). Some accounts of Phryne's life describe her as disrobing before the judges at the moment of the verdict. The judges took pity on seeing her naked – especially given that she had reportedly been a priestess of Aphrodite – and subsequently acquitted her. The story has an obvious appeal for the Symbolists, given how its dramatic denouement focuses on the female nude, but Stuck did not discover Phryne, nor was the theme unknown before his time. The French Academician Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) had depicted her in his painting *Phryne before the Areopagus*<sup>41</sup> (1861), as had the French painter José Frappa (1854–1904) in his *Phryne*<sup>42</sup> (1904) and Alexandre Falguière (1831–1900) (date unknown) in sculpture.<sup>43</sup> Still earlier, the English Romantic artist William Turner (1775–1851) had painted her in his *Phryne Going to the Public Baths as Venus – Demosthenes Taunted by Aeschines*<sup>44</sup> (1838). Baudelaire took her as the



subject of his poems 'Lesbos' and 'Beauty', and the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) had used her for an eponymous opera in 1894. Stuck would in part have been working to this tradition.

Unsurprisingly the painting depicts the moment of Phryne's disrobing itself. Compositionally the painting is entirely focused on her figure, as Stuck places the observer in the position of one of the judges. She faces us directly, opening her robe to display the full splendour of her naked form. Stuck makes the robe itself a dark reddish-maroon, setting it and her figure against a sheer black background. In doing so he focuses maximal attention on her pale flesh. The silver diadem and earrings that she wears, as well as her golden boots, throw the flesh of her legs and torso into relief. Moreover although the robe partially conceals a small part of her body, Stuck does not shy away from depicting her breasts or genitalia. Yet despite her sexual allure Phryne is not a malevolent figure, where in another context this might have made her so (see next chapter). Her delicate flesh, set against the harshness of the dark background and the unforgiving cold stone floor of the Areopagus – elements which seem to foreshadow death – construct a polarity in which her contrasting warmth represents life. At the same time her kind expression leads us to feel that she may have been unfairly treated. Stuck thus challenges the observer to imagine her apparition from the perspective of a sympathetic judge, at the very moment that his stern resolution is broken.

What is the meaning of this painting? The artist has clearly emphasized the erotic aspects of the Greek legend as prominently as possible. More generally, both Stuck's choices of subject – frequently classical in origin – and his approach to portraying these have a strong tendency towards the representation of, and appeal to, man's sexual instincts. These are often although not exclusively heterosexual in nature. True to form, there is no sense here of any conventionally moral or didactic interpretation of the legend by the artist. Stuck clearly intends that we consider Phryne's sexuality as a powerful yet benevolent force, and she is accordingly the sole and dominating element of his entire composition. In this way he casts her legend as an allegory of the, in his view, ultimately benign nature of female sexuality, and of the erotic in general. This is consistent with Stuck's wider erotic transformations of classical myth and art, and the broader Symbolist conception of the classics as repository and distillation of the essential and vital erotic life of man.

Phryne's story can, however, hardly claim to be the best-known Greek legend or myth providing material for artists to represent the Greek body in its female incarnation. But the judgement of Paris might well stake a claim to that title. The subject had long been a staple of Neoclassical art, and continued to have a certain resonance for the Symbolists. The myth tells of how the Trojan shepherd (and later prince) Paris was asked to be judge in a beauty contest. Deliberately provoked by Eris (Discord), the three goddesses Hera, Aphrodite and Athena sought a judgement on their relative beauty. Each offered Paris a different gift as bribe, Aphrodite's being the love of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy (which had the unfortunate consequence of triggering the Trojan War). Academic depictions of the myth had tended to be largely schematic, often little more than anatomical exercises, though this was not always the case.<sup>45</sup> Despite their departure from Academicism, the Symbolists felt that the subject retained an appeal on account of its erotic potential. In Paris' preference for Aphrodite the Symbolist artist had, as in the



**Figure 12** Max Klinger, *The Judgement of Paris* (detail). Courtesy Getty – Francis G. Mayer/Contributor.

legend of Phryne, a ready-made classical allegory for the inevitable triumph of the erotic.

Klinger depicted the myth in his *The Judgement of Paris*<sup>46</sup> (1885–87) (Figure 12), exhibited in Vienna in 1887. Klinger focuses on the heavenly nudity of the three goddesses stood before the seated Paris, awaiting his judgement of their beauty. Centre stage is Hera, the crown upon her head indicating her royal status as queen of the gods. Behind her is Aphrodite, facing us rather than Paris, her upper body disrobed and holding up her long red hair the better for Paris to see. Finally, stood to the right of the composition is Athena, who has not yet removed her clothes and crosses her arms sullenly on her chest. Behind Paris and facing away from us is a muscular male nude, his guide the god Hermes. As for Paris himself, as so many males in Symbolist art, he appears somewhat unsure faced with such a brazen display of female beauty, and is clearly having difficulty making up his mind (see discussion below of the Czech Symbolist painter Jan Preisler's (1872–1918) *Spring*<sup>47</sup>). Klinger shows all of his figures on a mosaic terrace set against a background landscape featuring a dark forest, mountains and a dramatic sky, which continues into the painting's frame. The frame's additional decoration is elaborate, including on the right-hand side a winged Cupid beholding the contest pensively, as well as gorgon heads and faces in the lower part of the frame.

The painting formed one of a series of four murals Klinger completed for the vestibule of the judge Julius Albers' villa in Berlin-Steglitz. At the time, the painting provoked a critical reaction on account of its rejection of several attributes conventionally used in the portrayal of the myth, and above all for its naively direct approach to representing the nude. It is interesting that two of the other paintings for the Villa Albers feature Christian themes, the *Crucifixion of Christ* and *Christ in Olympus*<sup>48</sup> (1890–97) (see discussion below), for which Klinger apparently intended his *The Judgement of Paris* to be a sort of pagan counterpoint. The three paintings construct a dichotomy between Christian and pagan religion, while also imagining the meeting of the two. It is significant, then, that in choosing a single theme to summarize classical antiquity, Klinger made the choice he did. If the crucifixion is the ultimate expression of Christian passion, then for Klinger the three goddesses' beauty is the classical equivalent. And, as discussed below, the third painting in the series directly reflects Klinger's fascination with the tension between the eroticism of the ancient

world and a Christian concept of virtue. In representing that eroticism, it is primarily the female nude that Klinger turns to.

Vrubel, arguably the greatest Russian Symbolist painter, also made extensive use of classical myth, including the judgement of Paris. Vrubel, several of whose works we consider in this book, was a painter, sculptor and draughtsman later considered by the Modernists as a sort of forebear.<sup>49</sup> Having studied under the Russian painter Pavel Chistyakov (1832–1919) at the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, Vrubel had worked on commissions to decorate churches in Kiev, before he moved in 1891 to Moscow where he joined the artistic circle of the influential industrialist and art patron Savva Mamontov (1841–1918). During the 1890s he developed a strong interest in Russian and other folklore (see discussion of his *Pan*<sup>50</sup> (1899) below), as well as the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov's (1814–41) *Demon* (1829–39). Vrubel is best-known today for his highly idiosyncratic and psychological interpretations of Lermontov's poem – none more so, perhaps, than his *Seated Demon*<sup>51</sup> (1891) and *The Demon Downcast*<sup>52</sup> (1891), which consistently show empathy for the demon as an outlaw figure, misunderstood for being only too human. In the later 1890s the artist's mental health deteriorated, leading to his spending the last years of his life in mental institutions. Vrubel's powerfully original work draws on multiple different sources, synthesizing these into a unique whole. As Reeder (1976: 334) summarizes: 'Although his work reflects many trends prevalent in Western art at the end of the nineteenth century, he gave these trends an original interpretation, using material from Russian folklore, early Russian and Byzantine art, and the Russian literary tradition.' This included classical myth and art, even if stylistically he was always closer to the Byzantine. The latter has been argued to have influenced him more directly than other Symbolists like Moreau, given his early immersion in the Byzantine inheritance of Russian art.<sup>53</sup>

It comes as no surprise then that Vrubel's *The Judgement of Paris*<sup>54</sup> (1893) is such a fresh take on the theme. While preserving the basic features of the mythological narrative, Vrubel goes much further than Klinger in compositional inventiveness. Instead of depicting his goddesses alongside one another, he places each in a separate panel of his triptych. In the central panel Aphrodite reclines in a sleigh drawn by the boy Cupid. Leaning back on her left elbow, half-undressed with her breasts exposed, she looks on at us languidly. Defying

convention (that she should be blonde or red-haired), Vrubel gives her, as the other goddesses, black hair. Aphrodite and her sleigh foreground a rocky Mediterranean landscape receding into the distance, in which we see the shepherd Paris, naked save for his loincloth and with staff in hand, sat on a rock beneath a tree. He looks on at the goddess, and it is already clear what the beauty contest's outcome will be. Meanwhile in the left panel, reclining in the clouds and towering over a very different coastal landscape, we see the queen of the gods, Hera. She wears a long red-and-white dress which spills out indiscernibly into the clouds around her. We can make out her crown as she draws back a hood from her head. Although not formally part of the same scene, she looks to her left in the direction of Paris and Aphrodite, peeved at the choice he has made. Down below, male Tritons sport in the rocky shallows, their fish tails flapping out of the water as one looks up at Hera. Finally in the right panel the goddess Athena, all girt in a pure white robe, strolls through another this time sylvan landscape. She walks through flowers, holding up her dress as she goes. Behind her we see a tree, its leaves now turned red, and a woodland stream. As Hera, she too looks on in the direction of the central panel, virtually level with Paris and Aphrodite, apparently displeased.

Vrubel's entire colour scheme is autumnal, from the red of Hera's dress and Aphrodite's sleigh, to the russet-coloured leaves of the tree above Athena's head. All three panels are immersed in a gloaming of gold and red, creating the impression of morning or evening. The explanation for this is likely in part decorative; the painting was intended for the staircase of the Moscow home of Elizaveta Dmitrievna Dunker (daughter of a local businessman and art collector). But Vrubel also evokes the heat and languor of the Mediterranean landscape. In contrast to Neoclassical takes on the myth, however, his composition creates a dynamic swirl of movement. Meanwhile the louring orange-red sky inevitably lends the scene a threatening undertone. Is this a foreboding of the doom that awaits mankind in the Trojan War, as a result of Paris' judgement? There is undoubtedly a connotation here that the erotic power of the Greek body is world-moving, even if its actual depiction is understated compared with Klinger's directness. A goddess' beauty is not lightly spurned.

As Greek myth, which on several occasions he interprets in a highly individual manner, it is clear that Vrubel had first-hand knowledge and

understanding of Greek art. This would have been a primary part of Vrubel's education, as it was for most Symbolists – something reflected particularly prominently in one of his works. His *Night in Italy*<sup>55</sup> (1891), one of several watercolour sketches that he completed for a theatre curtain, imagines a stage on which actors and actresses sit or stroll. The stage's background is a night-time view of the bay of Naples lit up by the glittering lights of the town below and moonlight reflected in the ocean. Vrubel, however, foregrounds the whole scene with a giant marble statue of the Venus of Milo to the left of the stage, propping back the great curtain. Her armless torso, facing the action on stage, introduces us as spectators to the theatrical scene and shimmering Neapolitan night beyond. She is a sort of reference point for Vrubel's painting. His characteristically blue colour scheme, lending the scene a beautiful, pensive and yet also slightly melancholic quality, throws the white marble of his Venus into greater relief. In her, Vrubel subtly signposts the debt both of his own art and of all art forms, including drama, to ancient Greece.

Yet more often than to evening, or autumn, the female nude was wedded by Symbolists to spring and the idea of new life. Böcklin's *Spring Awakening*<sup>56</sup> (1880) is a good example. The painting shows a spring landscape with four figures beside a stream, in the shade of some trees. The observer's attention is immediately drawn to the central figure of the scene, a fair-haired and scantily clad young woman who leans against a tree, her right hand on her waist, as she faces the observer frontally. With her head cocked to one side she looks out from the canvas flirtatiously as if beckoning us towards her, implying that we are looking back at her already. To her left, on the right of the canvas, another young woman all dressed in purple leans her back against a tree and looks downward pensively. On the left, on the other side of a stream, an old bearded faun plays on his pipes, a flowery garland strung across his chest. Behind him, all clad in white, another red-haired woman picks purple flowers and gathers them in a bouquet. The painting is a clear example of Böcklin taking the iconography of classical mythology and using it to create a Symbolist painting after his own imagination. Unlike in Neoclassical painting, there is no particular mythological narrative, no specific classical text referenced. Rather we have a series of enigmatic classical symbols that we are left to our own devices to interpret. Böcklin was a pioneer in this respect, freeing classical myth of its regular Neoclassical moulds. But the painting also shows how deeply engrained

the (frequently implicit) association was by this period between the iconography of the nymph, the faun, springtime and the erotic.

Many other artists made use of this same association in their paintings, where Stuck above all can be seen to inherit directly from Böcklin. Over a period of about a decade between 1902 and 1912, he worked on a number of versions of a single composition, the principal of which include his *Spring*<sup>57</sup> (1902), today in Budapest, and a later version now in Darmstadt also entitled *Spring*<sup>58</sup> (1909).<sup>59</sup> Both versions show in profile the upper body of a young red-haired beauty, apparently the same model in each case. In the 1902 version, she has strung a wreath of purple flowers through her hair. This is long, streaming down her front and back, reaching all the way to her waist and wholly covering her nude torso. Her expression is placid, half-smiling, her eyes seductive and inviting. She clasps to her chest a bunch of flowers alike to those in her hair. In the background we simply see a white cloudy sky, through which pockets of blue break, and the outline of three trees on the horizon coming into blossom, green, yellow and pink.

A few years later in 1909, Stuck revisited the same composition. As in the earlier version, the woman is shown in profile with long red hair. The only differences are that the flowers she holds in her hand are blue and that her hair, while heavier in the crown, no longer fully conceals her left breast. In keeping with the flowers, the sky is now more blue than pink, and the trees in the background are taller, level with the woman's shoulders. Her face retains its seductive expression. Stuck originally intended the *Spring* paintings to form part of a complete allegorical series on the four seasons. This does not exist in final form. What we do have is a painting depicting summer, as well as a portrait of the artist's wife Mary Stuck holding two apples, possibly a study for a painting on autumn. We encounter a variety of different classical ideals in Stuck's work, but there is something particularly emblematic about the measure and understatement of his depictions of spring. While the eroticism of many of his other paintings is explicitly articulated, that of his spring allegories is rather one of promise. In this we detect a more general theme in Symbolism and Art Nouveau, where the sexuality and fertility of woman become symbols for life and its potential for renewal.

Returning to the female body as object, what more can we say in general about the ways in which the classics were a vehicle for the Symbolists in



liberating the nude from its Academic mould? A painting by Vedder, *Roman Model Posing*<sup>60</sup> (1881), is instructive in this respect. A study made during the period he spent in Rome, the painting shows a young half-nude female model, sat on a divan as she poses for the artist. The lower half of her body is covered in an oriental cloth and her cream-toned flesh is partly shaded, offset against heavy black and gold Rococo wallpaper. In a nod (though the motif is adapted) to Velázquez' *The Rokeby Venus*<sup>61</sup> (1647–51), in a mirror placed behind the model we see her shoulder and the back of her neck. In her right hand she holds a small golden bowl, while she is surrounded by various paraphernalia including patterned rugs, a leopard skin and, by her feet, a jar decorated with the face of a faun or satyr, a (somewhat phallic) spout protruding from its forehead. Vedder's portrait remains essentially an Academic study of a female nude. Yet there is something undeniably intimate about this painting of a young woman. Although her posing is formal, her face is expressive – it is likely that her fine dark features appealed to the artist as representative of a particularly 'Roman' type. The observer very much feels they are in the presence of the model. We might consider such painting as representing, like the work of Puvis, a sort of borderline between Academic and Symbolist constructions of the female nude. Vedder sticks to convention in formal respects, but there is also individual character and personality here that would be lacking in a more standard Academic study of a nude. One way of conceiving of the Symbolist nude is that of the desire to turn marble to flesh, rather than flesh to marble. Several Symbolists considered Academicism as having done the latter. But here Vedder can be seen as attempting the former. While posing a real female body as if a Greek marble, he nonetheless preserves the life in the individual.

This process of incremental experimentation with the expressive potential of the female nude is something that could take very different forms depending on the artist in question. In the giant corpus of Moreau's work, one painting demonstrates that experimentation particularly well. Begun in 1853, exhibited in the Salon of that year and again at the Universal Exhibition in 1855, but not finally completed until 1882 when Moreau decided to enlarge it, his *The Daughters of Thespius*<sup>62</sup> (1882) is an overwhelming exploration of every possible posing of the female nude imaginable. For a narrative that would allow him to do this, Moreau turned to the eponymous Greek myth. In this the king Thespius offers the hero Hercules his fifty daughters as a reward for



slaying the lion of Cithaeron. In the painting we see Hercules sat on a stone slab in the centre of a classical palace heavily decorated with baroque statuary and carving. His tanned and muscular figure is shown in profile, his legs crossed and back bent as he looks on pensively. Surrounding him is a seemingly endless myriad of young female nudes. In the foreground, three nudes on the left and two on the right, all pale as marble, sit or stand, resting and lounging in various postures. Some turn towards Hercules, while others face the observer. Immediately surrounding Hercules, to either side and receding into the depths of the palace behind, are the other daughters, some nude and some clothed and several sporting wreaths of flowers in their hair. They contemplate Hercules with longing, fear or awe, while others avert their gaze.

We might think of the myth as the ultimate heterosexual male fantasy, which explains why it had rarely been depicted in Academic art, given the prudery associated with explicitly erotic themes. Yet Hercules' thoughtfulness and melancholy before all of these female nudes might surprise us. The artist explained his Hercules as one who:

feels within him the immense sadness of someone about to create, to give life, and yet at the same time feels assailed by that great elation of the soul that comes to he who is committed to sacrifice in every act of his fatal destiny. All the religious solemnity of primitive races is in him. A god brings him to life and sustains him.<sup>63</sup>

Characteristically, the semantics of Moreau's painting are extremely dense and incorporate astrological symbolism.<sup>64</sup> But *The Daughters of Thespius*, and the artist's interpretation of Hercules' role in the myth, belie an important aspect of the Symbolist approach to the female body and its sexuality. Even when not a mortal threat to the male (see next chapter), as in this myth, the female body can still be a cause of anxiety. The homoeroticism of Moreau's other works suggest a personal preference for the male body (which may explain Hercules' lack of obvious enthusiasm!). But while the interpretation should not be stretched, there is nonetheless a general point to be made here about an underlying fear many Symbolists entertained towards the female body itself, of which Moreau's Hercules could be considered emblematic. Where nineteenth-century Neoclassicism had, in effect, shackled that body, and its native eroticism, with the chains of Academic precept, the Symbolists were

simultaneously excited – and terrified – by its power unchained. The paintings of Moreau and others can, at one level, be analysed as playing out this dynamic.<sup>65</sup>

The obsessive depiction of the female nude in Moreau's *The Daughters of Thespius* also betrays a broader characteristic of Symbolist approaches to the Greek body as object, that of voyeurism (see discussion of the cyclops below). One Symbolist work in sculpture that depicts an inherently voyeuristic Greek myth and which also follows an ancient sculptural model closely is Klinger's *Diana Spied On by Actaeon*<sup>66</sup> (1906), presented by the artist at the Berlin Academy exhibition in 1907. According to Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 3.165–205),<sup>67</sup> who relates the most common version of his myth, Actaeon was a hunter who accidentally stumbled upon the goddess of the hunt bathing naked. He paid dearly for his error with his life after Diana transformed him into a stag to be torn to shreds by his own hounds. The myth had been popular with artists and sculptors, Titian's rendition of it being perhaps the most famous.<sup>68</sup> We are once more in the same territory of male fear in the face of the female nude. Klinger's marble sculpture depicts the very moment at which the naked goddess is caught off-guard by Actaeon. She squats on the ground looking upward to her left in surprise at his coming. Compositionally her figure is based on the classical sculpture the *Crouching Venus* (Figure 3), whose squatting position, bent back and turn of the head are similarly posed, although Klinger alters the position of her crossed arms by having Diana raise these in front of her body, as well as by tilting her head upwards. Diana has none of her usual attributes of bow, quiver and hunting tunic. Instead her form is completely exposed to the prying eyes of the intruder. Klinger does not, however, depict Actaeon's fear directly but instead implies it. Beholding the sculpture, we become Actaeon. It is we who have stumbled unbeknownst into Diana's grove, and we who are startled at the divine beauty of her form. But quickly we notice the mixture of surprise, alarm and anger in the goddess' eyes – subtly articulated by Klinger in her facial features – and we too feel Actaeon's terror, and impending sense of doom. The artist masterfully communicates the full voyeurism of the myth through a simple recasting of an ancient model. No further narrative feature, no explanation, is necessary as we are ourselves made participants in the drama.<sup>69</sup>

As we might expect given his typical subject matter, there is also a strongly voyeuristic element in much of the work of Rops. One series of drawings

where he too made a classical goddess the vehicle for this were his *Cythera* illustrations (1878–81) which, as his *The Moulding*, form part of his ‘Cent légers croquis sans prétention pour réjouir les honnêtes gens’ (‘One Hundred Unpretentious Sketches to Entertain Honest Folk’). The three drawings, *The Archaeological Society of Cythera*,<sup>70</sup> *The Weighing in Cythera*<sup>71</sup> and *The Toilet in Cythera*,<sup>72</sup> are all sexual satires on the theme of the goddess Aphrodite (one of whose ancient names was ‘Cythera’). The first, the frontispiece to the second group of ten drawings in the series – of greatest interest for our purposes here – gives comic expression to the voyeurism Rops saw as native to the quest to rediscover the female Greek body. In a sandy desert landscape an archaeological excavation is taking place, conducted by numerous small winged putti, who are all buzzing about busying themselves with aspects of the dig. Some sketch the ruins or make notes, some take measurements, while others dig or haul parts of the ruins around. But on closer inspection we realize that the ruins themselves are actually the bodily fragments of a giant sculpture of Aphrodite. The remnants of her lower torso, upper legs and crotch are visible in the upper part of the drawing, which several of the putti archaeologists are studying closely, one sketching and another – in a diving suit – preparing to enter. A further two are laboriously trying to dig up one of her feet, partly submerged in the sand, while at the bottom of the composition two groups of three putti are painstakingly attempting to transport each of her breasts. Beside all this mayhem is a sign that reads, ‘Archaeological Society of Cythera’. Rops’ satire riles the archaeologist and the seriousness of his efforts to reconstruct the Greek body, for he cannot see the wood for the trees. Aphrodite never did die, and was never buried.

*The Weighing in Cythera*, which features as part of the series’ sixth group of drawings, again shows a large number of little putti busying themselves, this time around the spectacle of a giant set of weighing scales. On the right scale sits a blonde Aphrodite, naked save for her green hat and shoes. On the left scale a number of worldly objects – a golden mirror, flowers, cloth, a jewellery box, bags of money – have been piled up by the putti, and several more below are preparing to add other household objects, as well as a purse with the name ‘Rothschild’ written on it and a book entitled ‘poems’. The implication of this second hectic scene in the imaginary land of Cythera is that sexual love is worth more than all that money can buy. The final of the three drawings, *The*

*Toilet in Cythera*, from the eighth group of drawings, shows the nude, this time red-haired and blue-stockinged, goddess sat preparing to wash. Putti buzz all about her, carrying various objects or assisting her with her toilet. One holds up a large mirror, in which the goddess is admiring her long red hair, held up at the other end by another putti. Still another flies in bearing a bottle with the label 'fairy water', while below several busy themselves with soap and perfume, and so on (one rather haughty-looking putti even carrying in a dish with a breast on it).

In the three drawings on the theme of Aphrodite, Rops lets his voyeuristic fascination with the female body run to comic lengths.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, a specific cast of female beauty emerges in the *Cythera* drawings, which we encounter repeatedly in his work (whether or not classically themed). Rops seems to have been particularly enthralled by the fair-haired women of the Low Countries, and his Greek goddesses – and Aphrodites above all – reflect this obsession. His various affairs with women as related in his correspondence suggest the same,<sup>74</sup> but in one letter of 1893 he explicitly spells out the association. Rops (1912: 67) writes to his friend relaying his view that the native beauty of the women of Flanders honours the goddess Venus:

But, believe me, Chateaubriand, Lammenais and Renan's books – as beautiful as they are – do not merit the rapture that the heroic torso of our sisters of Flanders evokes in us, whose flame hair burns like fire in honour of the great mother Venus.<sup>75</sup>

And in another letter of 1893 Rops (1912: 68–9) laments that he cannot find those blonde women of Flanders who famously pursued Baudelaire:

And the blonde women of Flanders, who followed Baudelaire, to hear his word – as the holy women followed Jesus – where are they, the blonde women?<sup>76</sup>

It is important to stress how individual each Symbolist's conception of the Greek body was, and how much coloured by local factors, or simply the idiosyncrasies of a given artist. That Rops' goddesses tended to reflect a particular northern European type is, of course, not unique to him in this period, during which an ideal of the Nordic heroine (and hero) (and the racial conceptions that underpinned this) was valorized by the operas of Wagner and

his adherents. But we should not assume that this was uniformly the case. While the female Greek body being dug up (literally, in Rops' first drawing above!) was in many cases the same – being based on the same archetypes – the ways in which it was then put back together, and reconstructed in Symbolist form, varied greatly.

Another Symbolist whose reconstructions of the Greek body have their own character is Stuck. His *The Dancers*<sup>77</sup> (1896) demonstrates clearly both his very individual relationship with Greek sculpture, and his recasting of it to fit a personal ideal of beauty. This oil painting, whose composition he reused in a later sculpted relief in plaster, reflects his interest – as that of so many other artists at the time – in the American dancer Loie Fuller (1862–1928). The fantastic dynamism of the movement of Fuller's skirt as she danced had captured the imagination of many artists at the time. The painting depicts two female dancers in profile, one dark-haired and one red-haired, dancing towards one another. Their arms spread out, their diaphanous dresses swirl about them, the one pale green and the other cream white. The whole scene is one of great motion. The naked forms of the dancers are visible through their dresses, the woman on the left twirling as she pivots on her left leg, while the woman on the right lunges forward. Stuck simply makes the background black, emphasizing the paleness of the women's flesh and the brilliance of their dresses. The darker Latin features of the woman on the left, and the pale-red complexion of the more northern-looking woman on the right, are themselves a contrast. These represent two distinct types of female beauty recurrent in Stuck's depictions of goddesses and nymphs, and which he appears to have held in equal fascination. But *The Dancers* also reveals a certain inspiration in classical sculpture, reflecting the iconography of ancient reliefs depicting dancing Maenads, the frenzied female followers of Dionysus.<sup>78</sup> While modernizing his women as dancers, Stuck carries over the ancient convention of showing his figures in profile or at quarter-turn, and of indicating dynamic motion by means of drapery.

Stuck makes the ancient Maenads flesh and blood again, reincarnating them as modern dancing woman – once again a Symbolist breathing life back into the marble. But it was another Greek myth that gave literal expression to this artistic-erotic fantasy, that of Pygmalion and Galatea. The legend of the sculptor Pygmalion, recorded by Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 10.243–97), had enthralled generations of artists: he who had made a statue so beautiful that he

had fallen in love with it, and whom Aphrodite took pity on by magically bringing his statue to life as Galatea.<sup>79</sup> Traditionally attractive as an opportunity to represent both the ideal female nude and the artist's own vocation, the myth enjoyed renewed favour among the Symbolists for its clear expression of the effectively magic power of the erotic. In a late treatment of this theme, *Pygmalion*<sup>80</sup> (1926), Stuck focuses on the very moment that Galatea is brought to life, and Pygmalion's astonishment at the miracle. We see him on his knees, arms stretched out in amazement and adoration, as he gazes up at Galatea. She, a perfectly formed nude with red hair, is still standing on her plinth as she looks down in pleasant surprise at Pygmalion. Stuck has painted the wall of the sculptor's studio behind Galatea a deep dark-red, the more to emphasize the tenderness and sensuality of her pale flesh. On closer inspection, her calves and shins still have the cold greyish hue of marble, suggesting that the transformation of marble to flesh is actually still happening. Yet Stuck's depiction of the myth remains essentially traditional. In the next chapter we see how Klinger took a very different approach, recasting the story in a new light. The myth of the artist who created perfect beauty is an important one for our study. Its appeal to the Symbolists reveals a great deal about the continuing resonance of a notion of art as the pursuit of beauty (whether or not of an erotic nature). It also betrays the strong association they made between the inherent mystery of the power of love and that of the power of art.

The erotic had other powerful, and classically articulated, associations for the Symbolists. Many of these were inherited from artistic tradition. One was its connection with the sea. We have already encountered Symbolist interpretations of its most direct representation in Greek myth, the birth of Venus from the ocean. But Symbolist iconography went much further. We have already mentioned in passing Böcklin's imagery of sporting Nereids (sea nymphs) and Tritons. During the 1870s and 1880s Böcklin completed a number of canvases on such themes. His *Playing in the Waves*<sup>81</sup> (1883) is a typical example. In the foreground one nervous-looking young Nereid, whose pale nude form emerges above the water (but whose fish tail we see below), is accompanied by a rather dissolute looking old Triton, who smiles as he grasps her around the shoulder. Above them two more Nereids dive and float on the waves of the sea, while another large Triton with distended stomach crests the top of a wave. In another painting of the same year, *In the Sea*<sup>82</sup> (1883), Böcklin

this time depicts a calm ocean featuring a group of Nereids gathered around a large hairy Triton strumming on a harp. One blonde-haired Nereid has climbed up onto the Triton's back, and clings onto his shoulders revealing her fish legs, while another two recline against him. Beneath him, beside the harp, a fair-haired Nereid bobs her head above water as she sings along to the music of the harp. In the background, two very ugly Tritons have stuck their heads above water to listen to the music, one of whom adds his own sea-shell percussion.

There are many other paintings by Böcklin on similar themes, featuring a similar mythological maritime iconography. All are characterized by a strong sense of abandon, both in style and subject. Compositions are tumultuous, colour contrasts violent. While we are in the realms of classicism, it is not the tranquil version of Academicism. Indeed these paintings have no identifiable narrative, nor do they seem to tell any particular story. And while portraying fantastic sea creatures, those creatures are uncomfortably human. We might consider, for example, the very human expressions of the two foreground figures in *Playing in the Waves*. We have the feeling that the magic creatures populating this maritime world are really humans in an erotic frenzy. Indeed at times Böcklin blends the Neoclassical iconography of the Maenad and satyrs (see Chapter 7) with that of his Nereids and Tritons respectively. The apparent depiction of human nature unveiled in Böcklin's paintings of this time did not go unnoticed by several younger Symbolists. In some cases it gripped their imagination. Among those Symbolists was numbered Klinger, who in a series of works in the 1880s and 1890s built upon the foundations of Böcklin's works. In these he explored still further the psychological potential of the association between the erotic and the sea.

This body of work included his decorations for the Villa Albers in Berlin (see p. 119). As part of a commission in 1883 the artist also undertook to design fourteen murals for the villa. Several large-scale mythological paintings formed a multi-part sea frieze running above the fireplace of the villa's vestibule. This frieze is very similar in nature to Böcklin's sea paintings and clearly demonstrates his influence. Due to their poor state of conservation in situ, a number of the paintings were moved to the Hamburg Kunsthalle a few years later. As a result of war damage, only two now survive. One of these, his *Tritons and Naiads*<sup>83</sup> (1884–85), features three groups of Tritons and Naiads



floating atop the waves in a sunlit blue scene. The composition is dominated by the blue sea itself, with all of the figures placed in a horizontal arrangement in its upper register – presumably in the expectation that the painting would be viewed from below. A central group features a Triton and Naiad side by side with their backs turned to us, the Triton hoisting up their young son on his shoulder, while other Naiads sport about them. All of the (principally female) figures in the composition are nude, and – typically of his works – Klinger uses his subject as a chance to experiment with posing the nude in multiple ways (see discussion of his *The Blue Hour* in Chapter 2). The other extant painting in this frieze, *Venus in a Shell Car*<sup>84</sup> (1884–85), depicts the goddess of love reclining in a giant clam shell drawn through the waves by two white horses. We see the red-haired goddess from behind, her face turned away from us and her right arm trailing languorously beside her. She turns to another blonde sea nymph to her left, with whom she converses. Both recline lazily on the red cushions of the shell car. Meanwhile a Triton tugs at the reins, the muscles of his back taut as he struggles to restrain the horses. The rest of the composition is filled with the cerulean tones of the waves lapping around the shell car, and a blue sky full of seagulls. In a sheer leap of imagination, Klinger reimagines his Venus as a leisured aristocratic beauty. Photographic evidence attests to the rest of the frieze as having shown similar Böcklin-esque scenes of sea gods playing in the waves.<sup>85</sup>



**Figure 13** Mikhail Vrubel, *Playing Naiads and Tritons*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.



The artist worked intensively on the decorations for the Villa Albers over the space of about a year. As Klinger (1924: 63) wrote to the Danish scholar Georg Brandes (1842–1927) in late 1884:

This year, most of my time was devoted to decorating a living space in Steglitz. Everything, walls, ceiling, doors, everything has been painted ... How I wish you could see the thing, because this, large-scale decoration, is probably my real field.<sup>86</sup>

Lejeune and Sabatino (2009: 23) have traced this interest of the artist's in mural decoration to the archaeological ruins of the Roman city of Pompeii, finding a common inspiration there for both Böcklin and Klinger:

There, his admiration for the Impressionists and the work of Arnold Böcklin (whom he met in 1887) is especially clear. On the walls of the villa, he realized his ideas of *Raumkunst*, derived from Pompeian mural art and iconically inspired by Böcklin's mythological scenes ... the works of von Hildebrand, von Marées, and Böcklin are tied together by a thin thread of poetic evocation, to those following shortly by Max Klinger.

Klinger's maritime paintings are less frenetic than those of Böcklin, but both betray the close association in the minds of the Symbolists between the sea and an erotic ideal. That even the Russian Vrubel, better known for his more melancholic subject matter, was drawn to this theme in his *Playing Naiads and Tritons*<sup>87</sup> (1896–98) (Figure 13) demonstrates the enduring hold it had on the Symbolist imagination. In a similar vein to Böcklin and Klinger, Vrubel depicts a number of free-spirited Tritons and Naiads sporting in the waves of the sea. Böcklin's influence is once again amply clear. Two Naiads in the foreground, their upper bodies surfacing above the waves, throw their heads back in joyous abandon and look towards us as they grasp one another's arms in play. Behind them Naiads and Tritons embrace or blow on sea conches, their fish tails emerging from the water. Vrubel suffuses the whole scene with blue, arranging his figures and the crashing of the waves to create an impression of tumultuous motion. As in Böcklin too, no clear mythological narrative emerges. We are instead once again in the realms of pure human instinct, and the gratuitous display of the female nude and its eroticism. Vrubel's painting shows that by the 1890s the subject had become something of a trope for the Symbolists.

We have seen in this chapter how the Symbolists' sexual objectification of the female body drew heavily on Greek sculpture and myth. For in their eyes the female body was first and foremost an object of beauty and desire. But it was not just this. In the next chapter, we explore how it was also a source of anxiety, and of danger. Together with their desire to celebrate the power of sexuality came an inevitable recognition of the danger that went with that power.

## Notes

- 1 'La femme est notre annonciateur suprême.'
- 2 As Cassou (1988: 47) summarizes: 'In order to express this internal language with the brush or the graving-tool, the Symbolists resorted to the same themes: woman in all her aspects – deadly woman, impure or decadent woman, idealized woman, *femme fleur*; the flower in all variations and stylizations which Art Nouveau gave to it; eroticism; Satan and Satanic perversions; sadism; lust.'
- 3 There had of course been a long tradition of returning to the forms of ancient art during the medieval period.
- 4 Félicien Rops, *The Moulding*, 1878–81. Pencil drawing with gouache and chalk, 21.8 × 14.9 cm (Private collection).
- 5 'Il aime l'étrange et la lointaine. L'histoire même est pour lui trop proche. Il vit dans la fable, dans les mythes. Parmi les héros, ce sont les plus mystérieux qui le hantent: ceux qui interrogent et bravent les monstres; les instruments inconscients du Destin: Hélène, Salomé. Il crée des Chimères. Quand elle ne l'emporte pas dans le passé le plus obscur, son imagination parcourt un Orient merveilleux où il se garde bien de porter ses pas, car il lui deviendrait présent.'
- 6 Moreau's teacher, Picot – whom Laran and Deshairs (1913: 21) describe as 'very classical' ('très classique') – was no doubt an important influence on the artist in this respect. Picot was scandalized by the later direction of Moreau's art.
- 7 See Laran and Deshairs (1913: 30) on Mantegna and the Italian Primitives' influence on Moreau.
- 8 Nicolas Poussin, *The Death of Germanicus*, 1628. Oil on canvas, 148 × 196.5 cm (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis).
- 9 Gibson (Gibson and Néret 2011: 63) describes how during this Italian sojourn the artist was 'especially attracted by the Primitive painters, and by archaic vases, early mosaics, and Byzantine enamels.'
- 10 Musée Gustave Moreau (n.d.: pp. 11–12).
- 11 As Selz (1971: 46) summarizes: 'Moreau wanted to make himself known as a renewer of the classical tradition . . . In his work, scenes of great dramatic

movement are rare. He was rather the painter of a static and, so to speak, silent humanity. He himself said: "Painting is an impassioned silence". As expressed by him, great passions are consumed in their internal fire.' ('Moreau voulait se faire connaître comme un rénovateur de la tradition classique . . . Dans son œuvre, les scènes à grand mouvement dramatique sont rares. Il était plutôt le peintre d'une humanité statique et pour ainsi dire silencieuse. Lui-même disait: "La peinture est un silence passionné". Exprimées par lui, les grandes passions se consomment dans leur feu intérieur.')

- 12 Much of the scholarly literature on Moreau is in French, with the Musée Gustave Moreau's publications primarily responsible for maintaining the artist's profile. For a good anglophone summary of the literature on Moreau's reception, see Cooke (2014).
- 13 Kahn (1902: 17) saw Moreau's Symbolism as equally as impactful as Impressionism on the trajectory of French art during the period: 'There was painting, there was music. Painting was the Impressionists exhibiting marvels in empty apartments for three months. It was the marvellous panel of Gustave Moreau, opening a damascene and inlaid door on the legend, at the exhibition of 1878, it was Manet, Monet, Renoir, grace, elegance, sun, truth, and above all Music – which awoke in France after a long sleep.' ('Il y avait la peinture, il y avait la musique. La peinture c'était les impressionistes exposant des merveilles dans des appartements vacants pour trois mois. C'était, à l'exposition de 1878, un merveilleux panneau de Gustave Moreau, ouvrant sur la légende une porte niellée damasquinée et orfèvrée, c'était Manet, Monet, Renoir, de la grâce, de l'élégance, du soleil, de la vérité, et surtout c'était la Musique – qui se réveillait en France d'un long sommeil.')
- 14 Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 206.4 × 104.8 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 15 See summary of contemporary reactions in Laran and Deshairs (1913: 25).
- 16 Puvis de Chavannes, *Autumn*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 285 × 226 m (Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon).
- 17 'Mais si M. Puvis de Chavanne a quelquefois exposé quelques toiles pas trop élimées, quelques charpies quasi fraîches; il ne faudrait cependant pas affirmer qu'il a apporté en art une nouvelle note . . . Cet interminable carton m'apparut comme le gala présomptueux d'une antique panne, comme une oeuvre lente et figée, laborieuse et fausse. C'était l'oeuvre d'un rusé poncif, d'un gourmand ascète, d'un éveillé Lendore; c'était l'oeuvre aussi d'un infatigable ouvrier qui, travaillant dans les articles confiés aux oncles de l'art, pourrait être réputé prud'homme et sage maître si la sotte emphase d'une critique en vogue ne s'évertuait à le proclamer grand artiste original et grand poète. Comparer M. Puvis et M. Gustave Moreau, les marier, alors qu'il s'agit de raffinement, les confondre en une botte

d'admiration unique, c'est commettre vraiment une des plus obséquieuses hérésies qui se puissent voir. M. Gustave Moreau a rajeuni les vieux suints des sujets par un talent tout à la fois subtil et ample; il a repris les mythes éculés par les rengaines des siècles et il les a exprimés dans une langue persuasive et superbe; mystérieuse et neuve. Il a su d'éléments épars créer une forme qui est maintenant à lui.

M. Puvis de Chavanne n'a rien su créer.'

- 18 'Des déesses chevauchant des hippogriffes et rayant du lapis de leurs ailes l'agonie des nuées; des idoles féminines, tiarées, debout sur des trônes aux marches submergées par d'extraordinaires fleurs ou assises, en des poses rigides, sur des éléphants, aux éléphants, aux fronts mantelés de verts, aux portails chappés d'orfrois, couturés ainsi que de sonnaillies de cavalerie, de longues perles . . . L'on comprenait mieux encore cette oeuvre de Gustave Moreau, indépendante d'un temps, fuyant dans les au delà, planant dans le rêve, loin des excrémentielles idées, secrétées par tout un peuple.'
- 19 Gustave Moreau, *The Birth of Venus* (*Venus Appearing to the Fishermen*), 1866. Oil on panel, 21 × 26 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 20 Alternative creation myths for the goddess are provided by Homer (*Iliad* 5.370) and Plato (*Symposium* 180e).
- 21 Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1485. Tempera on canvas, 172.5 × 278.5 cm (Uffizi, Florence).
- 22 Sandro Botticelli, *Spring*, c. 1477–82. Tempera on panel, 202 × 314 cm (Uffizi, Florence).
- 23 Gustave Moreau, *Venus Rising from the Sea*, 1866. Oil on panel, 55.5 × 45.5 cm (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem).
- 24 'C'est ainsi que je pus voir à Bordeaux des oeuvres de Millet, Corot, Delacroix, les débuts de Gustave Moreau.'
- 25 Selz (1971: 26): 'he distorted their character by forcibly enrolling Redon in the ranks of Symbolism . . . There is no disputing the fact that a relationship can be observed between certain compositions by Redon and those of Gustave Moreau. But though both artists sometimes felt a preference for the same themes, Redon never permitted himself to be seduced by that esthetics of the oriental tale, that baroque mythology, and those ornamental refinements into which Gustave Moreau had ventured.'
- 26 'On dirait que, dans l'air celtique, il s'est accumulé un long dépôt de l'âme humaine, pleine de jours et de temps, comme un esprit des choses, de légende aussi. Elle y chante ses choeurs qui sont la substance même de tout le peuple, de son passé, de son génie, la permanente évocation de ses tourments et de ses désirs.'
- 27 'Le maître tient encore au passé par des attaches classiques. Le mode de représentation est essentiellement formel, plastique; il procède par surfaces planes;

il modèle, il recherche le relief des choses. La ligne est soutenue; l'ordonnance est presque sobre . . . Quelques années encore et il va comprendre que Dante et le monde latin ne sont pas sa voie: il n'y revient plus, il a sourdement la conscience que ses muscles ne le porteront pas plus loin en cette voie, qu'il n'y suffirait pas et bientôt il va s'abandonner à sa nature essentiellement nerveuse, à l'expression pure, à la représentation de la vie intérieure seulement et ne cherchera pas à lutter dans la plastique même, avec des maîtres anciens qui le dépassent et il comprend enfin que son époque est une époque d'expression pure, que le romantisme n'est autre chose que le triomphe du sentiment sur la forme, et sans retours ni regrets, il entre dans sa vraie voie, qui est celle de la couleur expressive, de la couleur que l'on pourrait appeler couleur morale.'

- 28 'Il peint chaque détail dans le sens qui lui est particulier. Vénus est entourée de bleu tendre; dans un nuage gris tout exquis de tendresse, les amours volent et déploient les ailes orientales. Cérès a toute la poésie de nos plus beaux paysages, elle est ensoleillée. Mercure exprime dans son Manteau rouge tout le faste du bien-être captionné et du commerce. Mars est d'un violet terrible; son casque est d'un rouge amer, emblème de la guerre. Le peintre exprime tout par ses accessoires . . . L'attribut qui définit chaque dieu devient inutile, tant la couleur charge de tout dire et d'exprimer juste; le reste de tradition qu'il conserve encore, pour la clarté, est inutile.'
- 29 On his use of the colour black, Redon (1922: 23/84) commented: 'I only feel the shadows, the visible reliefs; every contour being without any doubt an abstraction . . . One must respect black. Nothing demeans it. It does not please the eyes, and arouses no sensuality. It is much more the agent of the spirit than the pretty colour of the palette or of the prism. Equally, a stronger impression is to be had rather in a morose land, where the inclement nature outside forces man to confine himself at home, in the culture of his own thoughts, as well as in the regions of the north, for example, and not those meridional lands, where the sun brings us out and enchants us.' ('Je ne sens que les ombres, les reliefs apparents; tout contour étant sans nul doute une abstraction . . . Il faut respecter le noir. Rien ne le prostitue. Il ne plaît pas aux yeux et n'éveille aucune sensualité. Il est agent de l'esprit bien plus que la belle couleur de la palette ou du prisme. Aussi la bonne estampe sera-t-elle goûtée plutôt en pays grave, où la nature au dehors peu clémente contraint l'homme à se confiner chez soi, dans la culture de sa propre pensée, ainsi que dans les régions du nord, par exemple, et non celles du midi, où le soleil nous extériorise et nous enchante.')'
- 30 'Je vous défie, si vous avez pénétré un moment sous les voûtes si froides du temple académique, d'y trouver un esprit qui rajeunisse ainsi l'antiquité avec une liberté si entière et dans une forme à la fois si contenue et si véhémence. Ce maître n'a point

- quitté depuis son début, les légendes de l'antiquité païenne, et les présente sans cesse sous un jour nouveau. C'est que sa vision est moderne, essentiellement et profondément, c'est qu'il cède docilement surtout aux indications de sa propre nature.'
- 31 Redon completed another major canvas on the same theme as this painting, as well as several studies. Odilon Redon, *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1912. Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 62.2 cm (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).
- 32 Odilon Redon, *Pandora*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 62.2 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 33 Hesiod, *Theogony* 560–612; *Works and Days* 60–105.
- 34 Variant versions include: (1) Odilon Redon, *Pandora*, 1910/12. Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 62.9 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC); (2) Odilon Redon, *Pandora*, undated. Pastel and charcoal on board, 29.1 × 22 cm (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).
- 35 Titian's depiction of the myth is, however, an early example focusing on the female nude: Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, c. 1554–56. Oil on canvas, 175 × 189.5 cm (Wallace Collection, London).
- 36 Odilon Redon, *Andromeda*, 1904/10. Oil on panel, 56 × 54 cm (Art Institute, Chicago).
- 37 See also, for example: Odilon Redon, *Andromeda*, c. 1907. Oil on canvas (Villa Flora, Winterthur).
- 38 Gustave Moreau, *Perseus and Andromeda*, c. 1870–80. Oil on panel, 20 × 25.4 cm (Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol).
- 39 Franz von Stuck, *Phryne*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 152.8 × 57.8 cm (Portland Art Museum, Portland).
- 40 Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 13.
- 41 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Phryne before the Areopagus*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 80.5 × 128 cm (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).
- 42 José Frappa, *Phryne*, 1904. Oil on canvas (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 43 Alexandre Falguière, *A Bronze Female Nude: Phryne*, date unknown (late nineteenth century). Bronze sculpture, h. 71 cm (private collection).
- 44 William Turner, *Phryne Going to the Public Baths as Venus – Demosthenes Taunted by Aeschines*, 1838. Oil on canvas, 180.5 × 165 cm (The Tate Gallery, London).
- 45 The Czech academic painter Vojtěch Hynais' (1854–1925) depiction of the theme was much celebrated in its time for its novel approach to colour: Vojtěch Hynais, *The Judgement of Paris*, 1892–93. Oil on canvas (National Gallery, Prague).
- 46 Max Klinger, *The Judgement of Paris*, 1885–87. Oil on canvas, with wood and plaster frame, 370 × 752 cm (Belvedere, Vienna).
- 47 Jan Preisler, *Spring*, 1900. Oil on canvas (triptych), (from left to right) 112 × 70 cm, 112 × 186 cm, 112 × 70 cm (National Gallery, Prague).

- 48 Max Klinger, *Christ in Olympus*, 1890–97. Mixed media on panel, 500 × 900 cm (Museum of the Fine Arts, Leipzig). Severely damaged during the Second World War.
- 49 See Roberta (1976: 323): ‘Although Vrubel was largely unappreciated in his own time, it was he more than any other Russian artist of this period who was to have a decisive influence on the direction art would take in the next generation of Russian artists, a generation which included Vasily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo, and Kasimir Malevich.’
- 50 Mikhail Vrubel, *Pan*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 124 × 106 cm (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).
- 51 Mikhail Vrubel, *Seated Demon*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 213.8 × 116.5 cm (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).
- 52 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Demon Downcast*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 139 × 387 cm (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).
- 53 Reeder (1976: 326): ‘Another important influence on Vrubel during his early development was Byzantine and medieval Russian art. Other artists to be attracted to Byzantine art were Moreau and Gustav Klimt, who had also been directly influenced by the mosaics of the Italian churches. However, the influence on Vrubel was perhaps much stronger, for he grew up in a milieu where this art was part of the religious and spiritual heritage.’
- 54 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Judgement of Paris* (triptych), 1893. Oil on canvas (The M. A. Vrubel Omsk Regional Museum of Fine Arts, Omsk).
- 55 Mikhail Vrubel, *Night in Italy*, 1891. Watercolour on cardboard (Pushkin Museum of Fine Art, Moscow).
- 56 Arnold Böcklin, *Spring Awakening*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 66 × 130 cm (Kunsthhaus, Zürich).
- 57 Franz von Stuck, *Spring*, 1902. Oil on wood (Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest).
- 58 Franz von Stuck, *Spring*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 62.8 × 60.3 cm (Hessischen Landesmuseum, Darmstadt).
- 59 A further early variation of this composition is also extant: Franz von Stuck, *Spring*, 1900/02. Oil on wood, partly parquetered, 58 × 50 cm (private collection).
- 60 Elihu Vedder, *Roman Model Posing*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 90.8 × 62.2 cm (private collection).
- 61 Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus* (*The Rokeby Venus*), 1647–51. Oil on canvas, 122.5 × 177 cm (National Gallery, London).
- 62 Gustave Moreau, *The Daughters of Thespius*, 1853–82. Oil on canvas, 258 × 255 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 63 Cited at: <https://en.musee-moreau.fr/object/daughters-thespius-les-filles-de-thespius>.
- 64 The bull and sphinx flanking Hercules respectively represent the sun and moon.

- 65 See Margerie (1998) and Cooke (2003).
- 66 Max Klinger, *Diana Spied On By Actaeon*, 1906. Marble sculpture, h. 112 cm (Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen).
- 67 The Hellenistic poet Callimachus (*Hymns* 5) also provided a similar narrative, while the tragedian Euripides (*Bacchae* 327–43) attributes his fate to his boasting of being a better hunter than Artemis.
- 68 Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556–59. Oil on canvas, 184.5 × 202.2 cm (National Gallery, London).
- 69 This dynamic of simultaneous attraction to and fear of female beauty is also something found in classical art. See Platt (2016).
- 70 Félicien Rops, *The Archaeological Society of Cythera*, 1878–81. Coloured engraving, 26 × 18 cm (private collection).
- 71 Félicien Rops, *The Weighing in Cythera*, 1878–81. Watercolour, pastel, gouache and chalk, 22 × 15 cm (private collection).
- 72 Félicien Rops, *The Toilet in Cythera*, 1878–81. Watercolour, pastel, gouache and chalk, 22.4 × 15.2 cm (private collection).
- 73 For another example in the same series where Rops voyeuristically celebrated the female body, but used a different Greek goddess (Athena) to do so, see: Félicien Rops, *The Intermission of Minerva*, c. 1878. Pastel, pencil and watercolour, 22.5 × 15.5 cm (Félicien Rops Provincial Museum, Namur).
- 74 See Rops (1912: 45–6) for a letter of 1884 in which he details one such affair with a ‘tall, blonde, pale, and excited girl’.
- 75 ‘Aber, glaub mir, Chateaubriand, Lammenais und die Bücher Renans sind, so schön auch immer, nicht die Verzückerung wert, in die uns der heroische Torso unserer flandrischen Schwestern bringt, deren flammiges Haar wie Feuer brennt zu Ehren der grossen Mutter Venus.’
- 76 ‘Und die blonden Vläminnen, die Baudelaire folgten, um sein Wort zu hören, wie die heiligen Frauen Jesus folgten – wo sind die, die Blonden?’
- 77 Franz von Stuck, *The Dancers*, 1896. Oil on canvas (private collection).
- 78 For an illustrative example we might consider the *Dionysiac Relief of the Three Maenads* (Roman copy of late first century BC after Greek original of fifth century BC. Pentelic marble, 59 × 97 cm. Uffizi, Florence).
- 79 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) played a significant role in propagating the Pygmalion and Galatea myth in the eighteenth century. For a good example of a late Neoclassical rendition see: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas, 88.9 × 68.6 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 80 Franz von Stuck, *Pygmalion (The Statue of the Sculptor Pygmalion Brought to Life)*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich).



- 81 Arnold Böcklin, *Playing in the Waves*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 180 × 238 cm (Pinakothek, Munich).
- 82 Arnold Böcklin, *In the Sea*, 1883. Oil on panel, 86.5 × 115 cm (Art Institute, Chicago).
- 83 Max Klinger, *Tritons and Naiads*, 1884–85. Oil on canvas, 51 × 102.5 cm (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).
- 84 Max Klinger, *Venus in a Shell Car*, 1884–85. Oil on canvas, 50 × 173 cm (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin).
- 85 For more detail on the frieze as it originally appeared, see Becker (1905).
- 86 ‘In diesem Jahr habe ich die meiste Zeit auf die Ausschmückung eines Wohnraums in Steglitz verwendet. Alles, Wände, Decke, Thüren, alles ist bemalt worden . . . Wie sehr wünschte ich, Sie könnten einmal die Sache sehen, denn dieses, die große Dekoration, ist wohl mein eigentliches Feld.’
- 87 Mikhail Vrubel, *Playing Naiads and Tritons*, 1896–98. Gouache painting (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). A later version of the subject from 1899 also exists in the Ivanovo State Museum.



## Medusa – as Danger

Symbolist artists were fascinated by the tyrannical power of the erotic, particularly that of female sexuality over men. Many were convinced of its ability to enslave the will, to trump morality. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing: several Symbolists, above all those who disdained Christianity as little more than a cult of death, found in this truth a sort of vindication. Many nonetheless entertained a certain fear before the spectre of female sexuality, being in no denial about its power.

In this chapter we look at how Symbolist artists reinvented the Greek body as *femme fatale*. The latter was not their creation. We might rather think of her as the result of the gestation of a particular strain of nineteenth-century misogynist intellectual thought. But the figure of the dangerously erotic woman looms large in the imagery of many of the artistic movements of the *fin-de-siècle*, and plays a significant role in Symbolism. The *femme fatale* herself can already be found in earlier nineteenth-century painting. Lucie-Smith (2001: 43) for example sees in Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* (1877) this 'new conception of woman . . . already embodied here with all her most characteristic attributes.' We can trace her earlier origins in Romanticist (particularly Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) and William Blake (1757–1827)) and Renaissance progenitors. However, Freud's argument concerning an instinctual drive native to every human being, which he called the 'Id', also had a profound impact on Symbolist conceptions of sexuality, and of women's sexuality in particular. The French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's (1825–93) investigations into hysteria had additionally focused public attention on the power of hypnotic and unconscious states.<sup>1</sup> Several incarnations of the *femme fatale* we encounter here are a deliberate challenge to earlier Neoclassical, less threatening, articulations of woman in art, the shattering of which stereotype belies an anxiety about the dangers of unbridled female eroticism. The title of

this chapter reflects both the stultifying power that many Symbolists believed inherent to sexuality, and their turning towards Greek myth for models to express that power.

The Symbolists' obsession with the *femme fatale* affected their preferences for mythological heroines. As reference point we may return again to Moreau's *Salome*, and the fascination of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* with this painting. Cassou (1988: 48) synthesizes well the essential elements of Moreau's approach, which we might also consider characteristic of Symbolism as a whole:

Moreau found this theme of Satanic beauty in primitive mythology. Salome, Helen and the sphinx are not the only incarnations of the cruel feminine 'Eternal' as the artist saw it. His predilection covered subjects of morbid sensuality and mournful beauty, and of monstrous love. Dalida, Galatea, Pasiphae, Semele, Leda and Europa are the personification of the cold beauty necessary to seduce the decadents of the era such as Des Esseintes, the hero of *À Rebours*. Huysmans, describing Moreau's two paintings of Salome which Des Esseintes acquired, saw in this Jewish princess the same type of *femme fatale*.

Cassou hints here at one important aspect of what motivated this Symbolist interest in the threatening aspects of female sexuality: their own *ennui*. Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* is a paradigm of the type of aristocratic dandy who had, through his unending quest for what was enticing, already so jaded himself that the only pleasures of any value left to him were those that might also by their nature destroy him. This coincided with the growing contemporary interest in the occult – something which explains the frequency of the association of Satanic and erotic imagery in Symbolism, several examples of which we encounter in this chapter. Huysmans' (1908: 117–18) conclusion on the sensuality of Rops' illustrations captures well that occult conceptualization of the eroticized female:

He did not refrain, as his predecessors, from depicting the passionate attitudes of the body, but he made come forth flesh on fire, the suffering of febrile souls and the joys of distorted spirits; he painted demonic ecstasy as others painted mystic impulses. Far from the century, in a time in which materialist art saw no more than hysterical women consumed by their ovaries or nymphomaniacs whose brain beats in the lower regions, he celebrated not the contemporary woman, not the Parisian woman, whose

mocking graces and jewels escaped his appetite, but the essential woman removed from the times, the poisonous and naked Beast, the mercenary of Darkness, the absolute servant of the Devil. He has, in a word, celebrated this spirituality of Luxury that is Satanism, painted – in pages impossible to better – the supernatural quality of perversity, the beyond of Evil.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to be clear. This *was* about the women whom the Symbolists encountered in their own day. They did seek out in ancient myth and art models for the eternal *femme fatale*, but almost always those models were first and foremost an abstraction from woman as they knew her. And that was, more often than not, the very ‘Parisian woman’ that Huysmans describes. Even in Rops’ (1912: 6) case, we should qualify Huysmans’ comments about him with the artist’s own words from a letter of 1872, in which he explicitly states his interest in his contemporaries: ‘I’ve got another thing into my head: to paint scenes and types of this century that I find strange or interesting; its women are as beautiful as that of any other age, and the men are ever the same.’<sup>3</sup>

We have already encountered the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea in the last chapter. In his *Galatea*<sup>4</sup> (1906), for which he prepared several studies from 1903 onwards, Klinger made a departure from convention that is telling of the *fin-de-siècle* reorientation of interest in female beauty towards the *femme fatale*. A figural sculpture in cast silver that the artist showed at the exhibition of the Weimar Kunstlerbund in June 1906, *Galatea* transforms the myth in a new kind of allegory. The sculpture depicts a seated female nude sat upright on her plinth, her back straight and her legs crossed. As in so much of Klinger’s sculpture, the elongated proportions of Galatea’s body, her regular facial features and passive expression, and the treatment of her hair as a tight mass of curls betray the strong influence of late classical Greek sculpture. But her posture is otherwise highly original and expressive. Her elbows bent and her palms placed on her hips, she thrusts her torso forward aggressively. Klinger so models her figure that, though at first appearance mimicking the smooth harmony of an ancient sculpture, the sensuality of its curves is maximized and thrown into relief by the silver sheen and reflective nature of its material. But perhaps the most curious feature of the sculpture is a second, far smaller male figure stood with his head entrapped between Galatea’s crossed legs. His arms grasp at these as he looks up at her innocently. A stony contrast, her impassive expression now implies she is either unaware of, or else unmoved by, him.

As mentioned above, Klinger's art is by no means straightforward to interpret. Even if some of his contemporaries did, we should avoid the risk of simply interpreting this work as an allegory of man's sexual enslavement by woman. Nor is this the only work of the artist's in which the figure of the 'Virago' emerges strongly.<sup>5</sup> But it is undeniable that his *Galatea* presents a far more dominant, and aggressively erotic, image of the female nude than had previously been the case for interpretations of this myth. The comparison with Stuck's later, but more traditional, painting *Pygmalion* (see Chapter 3), is instructive. Instead of Pygmalion's astonishment at the blessing of his divine artistic creation, Klinger's male is entrapped by the beauty he has created, powerless to escape it. What does this imply for the other allegory artists had conventionally found in this myth – that of their own role as creator? We might interpret the work as implying that the artist is slave to his own work, represented by Galatea. Or rather, perhaps, this is another Symbolist homage to the inevitability of the artist's subjugation to the erotic (we are reminded of Klimt's famous declaration that, 'all art is erotic'). Whatever interpretation of this work we favour, it is hard to deny its strong characterization of female sexuality as an overpowering force.

To return now to this chapter's titular heroine: the story of the gorgon Medusa is referenced in multiple variant versions in Greek and Latin sources.<sup>6</sup> In Ovid's account (*Metamorphoses* 4.770ff), that most widely followed by artists, she was a beautiful young girl who was raped by the sea god Poseidon. Subsequently changed into a snake-haired monster by the goddess Athena that turned whoever beheld her to stone, she was eventually beheaded by the hero Perseus after he tricked her into looking at her own reflection in his polished shield. He then made a gift of her head to Athena, who placed it on her shield, a fearful sign for all of her enemies to behold. The image of the Medusa head is frequent in classical art (see example in Figure 14),<sup>7</sup> with the gorgon often found on both the breastplate and shield of statues of Athena (including the *Athena Parthenos*).<sup>8</sup> In particular, the famous classical sculpture the *Rondanini Medusa*<sup>9</sup> greatly influenced Medusa's artistic reception after Goethe's discovery of it in the Palazzo Rondanini in Rome in 1786. The sculpture was arguably more the focus of such reception than the myth itself, inspiring many masks on the theme in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Medusa's image had also become closely associated with the theatre, with the iconography of the



**Figure 14** Head of Medusa terracotta relief roundel (Hellenistic sculpture of second century BC). Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – gift of F. W. Rhinelander, 1898.

tragic and comic masks of antiquity widely used in dramatic contexts, featuring in the decoration of theatres and portraits of actors. Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was renewed interest in the – often hideous – image of the gorgon in ancient sculpture.

The Symbolists also evinced that broader artistic interest, but found in Medusa specifically a powerful symbol for the *femme fatale*. Other than its tragic inception, there is of course nothing inherently erotic about her myth. Yet in the hands of the Symbolists Medusa was often transformed into a figure of sexual, as well as mortal, peril. Böcklin showed an early interest in the myth, and an obvious debt to classical sculpture. His *Head of Medusa*<sup>11</sup> (c. 1874) in plaster and papier-mâché, today in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, is a classic portrayal typical of the theatrical decoration of the time. In a gold-framed rondel with a plain black background we see the haggard ashen face of the gorgon, her red hair bristling with snakes, her dark eyes wide and mouth agape in horror, mirroring that of her victims. In another version of the same composition from several years later, *Shield with Gorgon's Head*<sup>12</sup> (1897), the artist preserves this same expression. In the two sculptures, Böcklin conveys the full sense of (somewhat theatrical) terror associated with the Medusa myth in his time. But, significantly, he does not engage – beyond the iconic image of

the snake-haired gorgon herself – with the mythological narrative. In its essence this dynamic does not change for later Symbolists. While transposing her to new contexts, they ultimately remain mesmerized by the image of the snake-haired woman itself.

This is not to suggest that the Symbolists took but one approach to her interpretation. Böcklin himself portrayed Medusa in a subtly different, more sympathetic, fashion in another version of the same composition from 1878. His *Medusa*<sup>13</sup> (1878), today in Nuremberg, is an oil painting of the head of the gorgon. Once again we see her pallid face against a pitch black background, her hair entwined with snakes, apparently at the very moment that she is turned to stone. Medusa's face is heavily cast in shadow, the black snakes giving the impression that they are themselves emanating from the darkness behind. However, in this painted version of his composition, Böcklin emphasizes less the terror of his chosen theme than its melancholy. As Hirschmann (2012: 47) summarizes: 'Deep-set eyes stare mournfully out of a face so sad, so tragic that viewers are forced to feel sorry for the Gorgon and her wretched life'. Even within the scope of one Symbolist's interpretation of a single Greek myth we find a degree of variation. Vedder was similarly sympathetic in his early drawing *Medusa*<sup>14</sup> (1867). Clearly also inspired by classical models, it shows the gorgon's face on a shield entirely surrounded by snakes. These swarm about on all sides, snarling and snapping their jaws. Yet, in marked contrast, Medusa's face is sad and lacks any ferocity – again, a hint at the tragedy inherent to her story, even if it is not explicitly relayed. Even if Böcklin's and Vedder's portrayals of Medusa are stylistically conventional, remaining close to the classical models they aspire to imitate (Figure 14), they nonetheless betray the beginnings of greater experimentation. Several Symbolists went much further.<sup>15</sup>

No discussion of Medusa can omit the important Belgian Symbolist Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921). Khnopff had been a founding member of the Art Nouveau grouping *Cercle de Vingt* in Brussels, participating in their annual exhibitions, and was close to both the Pre-Raphaelites and occultists. His particular brand of the *femme fatale* had a profound impact on his Symbolist contemporaries, leading to his becoming known as 'the painter of closed eyes'. The artist's melancholic, dreamy and wistful, yet often also disturbing, imagery is highly individual. He developed an idiosyncratic female type, one showing the strong influence of the Pre-Raphaelites. This was based upon



his sister, Marguerite Khnopff, whom he depicted again and again and who recurs frequently in his allegories. Khnopff was also fascinated by classical sculpture – actively using it in one particular series of paintings – for the spiritual mystery which he felt it conveyed, as well as the enigmatic figure of the sphinx (see next chapter). He was intrigued by the Medusa myth and its possible meanings. In his *The Blood of the Medusa*<sup>16</sup> (1898), he took an altogether different approach to Böcklin and Vedder in a firmer departure from her traditional representation. In his colour drawing we see the stern expressionless face of Medusa's severed head, her irises near white. We fully believe her stultifying gaze could turn us to stone, despite its grey lifelessness. But her serpent hair continues to writhe about, several snake heads rearing up as if to strike, while curling upwards and intermingling with it is a great cord of black blood oozing out from her neck. Despite its lifelessness, Medusa's head is clearly still dangerous. Khnopff's gorgon acquires a new level of insidiousness, as he abstracts her into an image of evil itself, a personal conception of the malign.

However it is surely the Pole Jacek Malczewski's (1854–1929) transformations of Medusa that are the most imaginatively creative of any Symbolist. Indeed one could make such an argument of his classical receptions overall. A native of Krakow, where he studied under the Polish artist Jan Matejko (1838–93) and others, he later went to Paris where he continued his studies with the French artist Henri Lehmann and at the Académie Suisse. After a period travelling during the 1890s, including time spent studying ancient art,<sup>17</sup> he returned to Poland to hold a series of positions at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts. As many Polish artists of his time, Malczewski was deeply influenced by a growing sense of national consciousness, something which forms the central theme of his work, and the artist was closely involved in the Young Poland patriotic movement. But his work is at least as deeply affected by the classics, which seem greatly to have impacted his world view, and certain classical motifs recur repeatedly in his art. The result is that his painting is often a heady blend of national, folk and classical motif, whose symbolism is dense and at times so complex as to be confusing, or so personal as to be impenetrable. Nonetheless his work received a certain amount of international attention in its time, and he was honoured at international exhibitions in Berlin in 1891, Munich in 1892 and Paris in 1900.<sup>18</sup> He made

frequent visits to Paris, Munich and Vienna, but also to the Mediterranean, to Italy, Greece and Turkey, even taking part in one archaeological excavation.

The Medusa motif is widespread in Malczewski's work. His *Medusa*<sup>19</sup> (1895) is a painting of a beautiful and somewhat androgynous red-headed young woman with snake hair. A symmetrical arrangement of towering blue snakes crowns her mass of red hair, Malczewski defying convention by not making these one and the same. While we see no more than her bare shoulders, Medusa appears to be naked. She glares at us from beneath lowered brows, an evil smile on her face. The Symbolist association between Medusa and the eroticized female body is now more clearly spelt out. Some years later Malczewski returned to this transposition of the gorgon as red-headed *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* in his *The Artist and Medusa: Portrait of Tadeusz Błotnicki*<sup>20</sup> (c. 1902). Here again she appears to be a metaphor for temptation. Błotnicki is shown in armour, eyes virtuously downcast and clutching a cross to his chest as he is assailed by Medusa. She approaches from behind, her face right beside his. Furious, her lips pursed and eyebrows drawn together, she grabs him by both shoulders with her hands, her long fingernails clawing at him. Her red hair flies out behind, snakes going in all directions. This is Medusa as moral adversary and danger. Malczewski creates individual meaning in his portraiture through his transformation of classical myth. Moreover, as we see in our discussion of the faun, Medusa was not the only classical symbol the artist used in this way.

As well as the gorgon, the siren also had a long reception history in art as a metaphor for danger. The primary classical reference point here was the twelfth book of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, relating the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus on his circuitous journey home from the Trojan War. Other classical authors, including Apollonius of Rhodes (*Argonautica* 4) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 5.551–63), also described sirens, the latter providing a variant version of the myth in which they were the human companions of the goddess Persephone. But the *Odyssey's* portrayal of the beautiful female monsters that shipwrecked sailors by luring them with their inescapable song was the most current in their artistic reception. Strictly speaking, although the original concept of the half-bird siren was classical, the roots of her use as metaphor for the perils of sexual desire are to be found in medieval Christian thought (where the siren is more often conceived of as half-fish).<sup>21</sup> The siren as metaphor for danger and for sexual temptation had grown into a conventional artistic motif.

She became a favourite icon for the Symbolists, who tended, however, to adopt her directly from classical rather than medieval sources. Her danger inherently entailed a certain fascination for them. Moreover, the siren had the advantage of being associated with the sea, whose symbolism as a proxy for the soul had already been well established since Romanticism.<sup>22</sup> That association now enjoyed a revival as the Symbolists used the sea as one of several metaphors for the human unconscious. And so the siren too acquired new meanings. While most frequently symbolizing the ineluctability of woman's sexual allure, this is not always an end in itself but may in turn represent something else. For there was a natural parallel between the siren and the fascinatingly beautiful, but dangerous, call of another world.

Moreau frequently used sirens in his painting. These feature most often as a group of three, where his focus is generally on the narrative of the *Odyssey* itself.<sup>23</sup> However, in several compositions Moreau also divorces the siren from her literary context, transposing her to new imagined scenes. Whatever the context, for Moreau the siren is consistently a symbol of erotic power, temptation and danger. In his and other Symbolists' work the siren's reception therefore paralleled that of Medusa. Lucie-Smith's (2001: 69) summary of Moreau's women as 'beings whom it would be unwise to offend . . . personages who are both powerful and, for all their beauty, sinister' certainly applies to his sirens. A sketch in the collection of the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris, entitled *Ulysses and the Sirens*<sup>24</sup> (undated), shows the artist's preparatory engagement with his mythological subject. On the left of the composition, Moreau sets his three sirens in profile against a large rock. On the right, Odysseus' ship sails past. We cannot see its detail: just enough to make out the figure of the hero tied to the mast. His hands above his head, his legs writhe as he struggles to break free. The sirens appear as three slender female nudes. The foremost has long hair trailing out behind her in the wind. She stretches her hands out towards Odysseus in a gesture of pleading imprecation. Behind her another points towards Odysseus' face, as the last glares at him with beady eye. Waves swirl around them and around Odysseus' ship, the ocean visible on the horizon beyond. This sketch already shows the key compositional elements of interest to Moreau: the sirens as sexually tempting female nudes; and the hero Odysseus, wracked by the beauty of their song. Another watercolour sketch in the Musée Moreau, again entitled *Ulysses and the Sirens*<sup>25</sup> (c. 1875), similarly indicates

Moreau's choice of sunlit seascape to convey the otherworldly power of his sirens. A simple wash of blue sea, golden sky, and the black outline of the prow and mast of Odysseus' ship, we cannot yet make out his own figure or those of the sirens. The whole scene is infused with gold, lending it a magical ethereal quality. The study shows the artist's careful attention to his landscape setting, which is maintained in later, more fully worked-up versions of the theme.<sup>26</sup>

Still, it was above all the sirens themselves that interested him, with such attention to landscape only ever accessory to their portrayal. His *Sirens*<sup>27</sup> (1882) (Figure 15), today in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums, focuses simply on the figure grouping of the three sirens, dispensing altogether with the narrative features of Odysseus and his ship. The three sirens, all beautiful golden-haired young nudes, stand together on the rocky sea shore. In the centre the tallest of the three faces us, a great crown of sea coral atop her head. She stares ahead enigmatically, as if into another world. Her two siren sisters cling to her on either side. The nearest, shown in profile with her long blonde hair streaming down her back, stares out towards the sea soulfully. The final siren, half-concealed behind the central figure but whose beauty is strongly reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite models, orients her body towards us while looking distractedly to the left. Perhaps she is looking out to sea at Odysseus' approaching ship, or again to another world we cannot see. Moreau has effectively recast his three sirens as a modified three Graces. Yet for all their stunning beauty, Moreau leaves us several reminders of their mortal peril. Their feet, which dissolve into snaky coils, remind us that appearances are deceiving and that they are in fact monsters. The dark rock against which Moreau frames his sirens, the baleful orange sunset – shot through with red like a searing wound – and the stormy black sky contrast sharply with the pale gold of the sirens' bodies. Despite their innocent beauty, the rest of the composition is overshadowed with some foreboding of ill. In its creative use of classical myth, the painting is strongly suggestive of the simultaneous fascination and fear inherent in the female Greek body for the Symbolists.

Moreau explored the eroticism of the myth in another series of paintings on the theme of the poet and the siren. All depict a forlorn poet in the company of a single siren, shown as a sexually alluring female nude. Now completely removed from her original epic context, she is made symbol of the artist's essential fascination with the erotic. In one version, *The Poet and the Siren*<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 15** Gustave Moreau, *Sirens*. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum – bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.

(1893), we see the siren stood in a sea grotto with the distraught figure of a lyric poet collapsed at her feet. Consistent with Moreau's other paintings, she is a statuesque beauty with long golden hair, which in this particular composition is crowned with green seaweed. She turns to behold the poet below, utterly under her spell, her right hand resting on his head. The pale flesh of her body

is lit with an ethereal light, suggesting her divinity, while her face itself – seen only in profile – is shaded. This is in strong contrast to the bright blue of her eyes, which shine madly as they transfix the poet. He is slumped over with his legs half-immersed in the water as he leans against the siren's leg. In contrast to that of the siren, his skin is ashen grey. He wears a crown of flowers on his head, and is partly draped in a red robe with his golden lyre strung over his back. But most captivating of all is his face. His head is tilted to one side and his mouth hangs open vacantly, his gaze cast aside distractedly as if he has succumbed to the siren's spell. Indeed the pointed contrast between the siren's hard gaze and his deranged expression is somewhat unnerving. We are left in no doubt as to her overwhelming power. Moreau has lovingly completed the details of the sea cave in which this bizarre scene unfolds in cerulean colours, offset with touches of red for the sea plants which emerge from the water around the poet.

Moreau re-explored this same subject two years later in a further version, now in the Musée Sainte-Croix in Poitiers, again entitled *The Poet and the Siren*<sup>29</sup> (1895). The same posing of poet and siren is retained, as is the sea grotto setting. The artist, however, slightly varies both figures. The siren is again a statuesque young female nude, who looks down upon the poet. But the painting's colour scheme is now more toned down, with her hair less a radiant blonde than the blue and green of its interwoven seaweed. She also leans on a long staff topped with coral. Her right hand no longer touches the top of the poet's head, but dangles (almost threateningly) above it. In addition, a third figure has been added to the composition. Not as immediately apparent given its cerulean colouring, it is a sort of ghastly sea creature (or another siren in its true form?). Knelt before the siren, it rests its arm upon the poet. We can make out its blue face in profile, its shaggy seaweed hair topped with a red coral crown, as well as its coiling fish tail in the foreground. The poet is much unchanged, other than that his mouth and eyes are now closed and he looks less haggard, if not less endangered. Moreau alters the setting slightly, creating an iridescent cave wall as backdrop, while retaining the toned-down highlights of the red plants. An elaborate border design is now included too, featuring Tritons, crabs and imaginary sea creatures.<sup>30</sup>

What can we make of this series of works on the imagined theme of the poet and the siren, and what do they mean? Undoubtedly Moreau intended to convey certain qualities that he associated with the siren – beauty, the erotic,

and heavenly music – and to express their enthralling and overwhelming nature for the poet. At one level, then, we can understand the siren as an allegory for poetic inspiration, simultaneously expressing the allure and the creative power of intense beauty – as the muse – but also dangerous for the very reason of that power. As for the poet, consistent with literary Symbolism he is to be understood in the broadest possible sense, as both artist and musician. But in Moreau's case he is in some ways the more interesting figure. In the presence of the majestic and terrifying siren, whose proportions (literally) dwarf him, he seems an endangered species. This should be seen in the context of Moreau's wider work, where the figure of the tragic but beautiful poet is widespread (see later chapters). More generally, the suggestion is frequently implicit that only by virtue of his tragic state may the poet's full beauty be realized, including occasionally through his death. The siren is certainly a perilous figure for Moreau. But we should approach the interpretation of Symbolist works such as these with caution. The artist's allegories are often complex, and it is unlikely that he intended a straightforward illustration here of the dangers of erotic temptation. For the siren may be at once the poet's exaltation and his downfall, where the one does not preclude the other. Such an understanding of the siren here speaks right to the heart of the Symbolist concern with the female body as danger. For perilous she might be, but she was also – and in spite (sometimes even because) of this – muse. The Symbolist poet knew the danger of the siren's call. But often he heeded it nonetheless, knowing its dangers were a price worth paying to attain its great beauty. Has the poet not entered this perilous grotto of his own volition? Moreau leaves us wondering.

Moreau's siren had a strong impact on his contemporaries. Her imagery is articulated in similar terms by other Symbolists and, while not singularly responsible for the casting of the siren as *femme fatale* in this period, Moreau's creativity significantly shaped how she was imagined. One example is the French painter and engraver Armand Point's (1860–1932) *The Siren*<sup>31</sup> (1897). Point was not a leading Symbolist, but he was connected to Péladan's Rose + Croix circle, displaying his works in their exhibitions, for the fifth of which he designed the poster. Point's painting demonstrates the heavy influence of Moreau's siren. We see her by the sea, the lone figure of a beautiful young woman. Though Point gives her wings, this is nonetheless reminiscent of several of Moreau's other



mythological paintings. Point's colour scheme also borrows heavily from Moreau, applying a similar approach to creating a mysterious atmosphere. But, with Point lacking Moreau's virtuosity, the result ends up being somewhat flat – with the result that, as Mathews (1999: 107) highlights, we are returned (presumably unintentionally) to the dryness of Academic treatments of classical myth,

a more academic image of the femme fatale in *The Siren*. Point's image is handled drily and stiffly; the result is rather sterile and cosmetic. However, the standard elements of the destructive woman are here, such as her monstrous body, in this case winged. The sexuality of this image, or in this case, lack of erotic charge, lies in the full body view rather than in a sultry and seductive gaze. She is on display like the other academic nudes of the period and carries little threat to male sensibilities.

De Girolami Cheney (2016: 138–9), discussing the siren in Burne-Jones' painting, identifies three basic models in Symbolist art, one 'focused on the telling of the ancient tale', another which 'emphasized the luring aspect of the siren and her sensual desire for a man', and a final type – into which category she places Point's siren – which 'viewed the mysterious qualities of the siren, sometimes depicted in a trio, at times playing the harp, and other times just gazing at her future prey'. Moreau's siren really falls into all three categories, given his simultaneous interest in her eroticism, the effect of her song on the poet and, to a lesser degree, the epic narrative itself. But Point's painting shows how the theme – as other myths – quickly became hackneyed in Symbolist art, losing the individuality it originally enjoyed in Moreau's painting.

Beyond the specific myths of Medusa and the siren, many Symbolists also employed more generic imagery based on these and other classical myths. This did not necessarily reflect a specific narrative, but was often strongly redolent of those myths' conventional iconography. One such example is Italian Symbolist painter Giovanni Segantini's (1858–99) *Vanity or the Source of Evil*<sup>32</sup> (1897) (Figure 16). Segantini, best known for his Alpine landscapes and allegories, was a mystic and pantheist who spent much of his life in virtual isolation in Switzerland. His painting, which employs a form of pointillism, dabbled in both Symbolism and Neo-Impressionism. Several of his works, today largely conserved in the Segantini Museum in Saint Moritz, juxtapose the female body with wintry mountain landscapes in surreal arrangements



whose meanings are obscure. His *Vanity* formed a counterpart to another painting, *Love at the Fountain of Life*<sup>33</sup> (1896), which depicts two contented lovers walking in a spring landscape, an angel awaiting them on their path. In contrast, *Vanity* employs the female nude in an allegory of narcissism. In the midst of a verdant summer landscape, a beautiful red-headed nude stands beside a deep blue pool. At the water's edge, she leans over as far as she can, the better to admire her own reflection. As she does so she holds out her long flame-red hair. Flowers grow all about the rocks at the pool's edge, and the sun beats down on the landscape around. But this is not an image of joy; beside the woman's reflection in the pool we also see a snake, symbolizing vanity's destructiveness. As Stutzer and States (2016: 50) summarize:

If, as certainly happens, narcissism turns into vanity, not only the unadulterated beauty and the sexuality shows itself, but also ruin and disaster. The warning of evil and sin appears in the figure of a dragon-like serpent, writhing in the water.

Segantini's moral tale draws on a dual legacy of Christian and Neoclassical imagery. The parallel with the Biblical Eve is obvious. Yet the prominence of her hair (at the painting's centre point), matched as if its reflection by the red snake, also belies the inheritance of Medusa as *femme fatale* redhead. As for the siren, we have the strong association with water. And the reminiscence of Narcissus – the beautiful youth of Greek myth who tragically fell in love with his own image in just such a pool – is unavoidable. Segantini's image is deceptively simple, given the long iconographic tradition on which it draws. But as so many Symbolist works, its artist intended that iconography to be read and absorbed. Considered alongside its counterpart, the message is clear that happiness lies in loving another, evil in loving oneself.

The siren was not the only *femme fatale* the Symbolists transposed from Homeric epic. The weird and wonderful women encountered by the hero Odysseus on his journey home from Troy enchanted them too – above all, the sorceress Circe, she who temporarily detained Odysseus and his men, turning certain of them into wild beasts, but with whom Odysseus remained for a year after his men at length escaped her spell;<sup>34</sup> and the nymph Calypso, who kept Odysseus on the island of Ogygia for seven years. In an iconic painting, *Tilla Durieux as Circe*<sup>35</sup> (c. 1913), Stuck painted the eponymous Austrian-German



**Figure 16** Giovanni Segantini, *Vanity or the Source of Evil*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

actress and writer<sup>36</sup> in her role as Circe in Georg Fuchs' (1868–1949) *Jugendstil* reimagining of the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca's (1600–1681) play *El mayor encanto, amor* (1635), in which Circe is a seductive but dangerous witch. We see her in profile, the pale flesh of her figure – as so often in Stuck's painting – sharply offset by a pitch black background. The deep red of her dressed hair contrasts with her elaborate gold jewellery and blue-gold dress, which has slipped seductively off her right shoulder. With head bowed, she looks up mischievously, offering a small golden cup – presumably to Odysseus or his men. When we look closely we see that the cup is decorated with the figure of a lion – one of the animals into which Odysseus' men will be transformed on drinking the magic potion it contains. Stuck masterfully captures Durieux in role, and her recasting of Circe as the erotically fascinating but dangerous bejewelled beauty of the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>37</sup>

As a final thought for this chapter, we might briefly consider an earlier painting by Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso*<sup>38</sup> (1883). While illustrating another episode in which Odysseus is temporarily detained by a woman of supernatural powers, Böcklin's painting takes a very different approach to that of Stuck. For it demonstrates a less prominent strain within Symbolism that responded to

the danger of female sexuality by seeking to disengage from it. In this curious composition we see the two figures of Odysseus and Calypso on the rocky shore of the island on which she has detained him. The semi-nude Calypso reclines on a rock to the right. Her pale skin and red hair, and the red cloth she is sat on, contrast with the dark rock and sand, and the blackness of the cave behind her. She rests her hand on a large blue and gold lyre. However her face is distraught as she turns to behold the sullen figure of Odysseus behind her. He stands atop the rocks at the upper left of the composition. We see him from behind, his whole figure completely shrouded in a dark-blue cloak. Though we cannot see his face, it is clear that he is gazing out to sea, desperate – as in Homer – to depart the island and find his way home to his beloved wife Penelope. Despite Calypso's radiant presence, he appears a solitary figure and utterly alone. In this powerful image, which was later to inspire the Italian artist and writer Giorgio de Chirico's (1888–1978) *Enigma of the Oracle* (1910), Böcklin conveys all the melancholy of a man stranded (in Odysseus' case literally) by love. There is the suggestion that, despite the power of its allure, the eroticism of the female body alone is no substitute for true love.

The imagery of Medusa and the siren, and other mythological figures associated with them, was endlessly transformed by the Symbolists to express both their idolization and their terror of the *femme fatale*. After her abstraction as a symbol of beauty, her characterization as sexual menace is perhaps the second most prominent among Symbolist transformations of the female Greek body. But there was a third, related, way in which the Symbolists reimagined that body. In the next chapter we consider how it also came to represent mystery.

## Notes

- 1 Charcot himself believed in the power of art in his treatments.
- 2 'Il ne s'est pas borné, ainsi que ses prédécesseurs, à rendre les attitudes passionnelles des corps, mais il a fait jaillir des chairs en ignition, les douleurs des âmes fébricitantes et les joies des esprits faussés; il a peint l'extase démoniaque comme d'autres ont peint les élans mystiques. Loin du siècle, dans un temps où l'art matérialiste ne voit plus que des hystériques mangées par leurs ovaires ou des nymphomanes dont le cerveau bat dans les régions du ventre, il a célébré, non la femme contemporaine, non la Parisienne, dont les grâces minaudières et les

parures interlopes échappaient à ses apertises, mais la Femme essentielle et hors des temps, la Bête vénéneuse et nue, la mercenaire des Ténèbres, la serve absolue du Diable. Il a, en un mot, célébré ce spiritualisme de la Luxure qu'est le Satanisme, peint, en d'imperfectibles pages, le surnaturel de la perversité, l'au-delà du Mal.'

- 3 'Etwas anderes habe ich mir noch in den Kopf gesetzt: Szenen und Typen dieses Jahrhunderts zu malen, das ich sehr merkwürdig und interessant finde; seine Frauen sind schön wie zu irgendeiner Zeit, und die Männer sind ja immer die gleichen.'
- 4 Max Klinger, *Galatea*, 1906. Cast silver, h. 80 cm (111.5 cm with base), w. 31 cm, d. 34 cm (Kunstmuseum, Leipzig).
- 5 See further discussion of this dynamic in Hofmann (1991).
- 6 As well as Ovid, Medusa's myth is referenced by Hesiod (*Theogony* 270), Pindar (*Pythian Odes* 12), Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound* 794), Apollonius Rhodes (*Argonautica* 4.1515) and Lucan (*Pharsalia* 9.820), among others.
- 7 Head of Medusa terracotta relief roundel, second century BC. Terracotta, mould-made, h. 7.8 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 8 For a discussion of Medusa in classical art see Karoglou (2018).
- 9 *Rondanini Medusa*, c. first century BC. Marble sculpture (Glyptothek, Munich). Its original dating to the fifth century BC was subsequently disputed.
- 10 Baroque depictions of Medusa such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (1598–1680) *Bust of Medusa* also show an awareness of classical models, but would not have been influenced by the Rondanini Medusa given that it was only popularized at a later date. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Bust of Medusa*, 1644–48. Marble, h. 68 cm (Musei Capitolini, Rome).
- 11 Arnold Böcklin, *Head of Medusa*, c. 1874. Plaster and polychrome papier-mâché, h. 61 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
- 12 Arnold Böcklin, *Shield with Medusa's Head*, 1897. Relief sculpture in painted papier-mâché, h. 61 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 13 Arnold Böcklin, *Medusa*, c. 1878. Oil on wood, 39 × 37 cm (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg).
- 14 Elihu Vedder, *Medusa*, 1867. Graphite and ink on paper, 10.8 × 8.4 cm (Brooklyn Museum, New York).
- 15 Vedder also created another image of Medusa representing the ultimately tragic consequence of the unnatural love to which she was subject. This has the unique innovation of focusing on the gorgon's abandoned headless corpse – out of whose neck snakes crawl – rather than the severed head itself: Elihu Vedder, *The Dead Medusa*, 1875. Charcoal and white on buff paper, 39.5 × 57 cm (location unknown). A further version of the same composition features the figure of the

- triumphant Perseus, standing over the corpse bearing Medusa's severed head (see further Quinn 2015: 49–50). The Czech Maximilián Pirner (1854–1924) likewise departed convention by sympathetically depicting the gorgon as a sad young woman before her decapitation by Perseus: Maximilián Pirner, *Medusa*, 1891. Pastel drawing, d. 59 cm (National Gallery, Prague).
- 16 Fernand Khnopff, *The Blood of the Medusa*, 1898. Crayon and colour crayon on Japan paper, 21.5 × 13.5 cm (Galerie Sophie Scheidecker, Paris).
- 17 See further Olszewski (1989: 17).
- 18 Tsaneva (2014: foreword).
- 19 Jacek Malczewski, *Medusa*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 42.7 × 63 cm (National Art Gallery, Lviv).
- 20 Jacek Malczewski, *The Artist and Medusa: Portrait of Tadeusz Blotnicki*, c. 1902. Oil on canvas (National Museum, Warsaw).
- 21 The siren has a long reception history in the arts, particularly in Germany, which cannot be covered in detail here. See further Leclercq-Marx's (2002) study.
- 22 For example in the work of the German Romanticist Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840).
- 23 See summary in Lacambre (2003: 558).
- 24 Gustave Moreau, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, undated. Pen, brown ink, ochre pencil and graphite, 27.2 × 20.3 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 25 Gustave Moreau, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, c. 1875. Watercolour (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 26 For example: Gustave Moreau, *Sirens at Sunset*, date unknown. Watercolour, 31 × 50 cm (private collection).
- 27 Gustave Moreau, *Sirens*, 1882. Watercolour and gouache, brown ink and black chalk on cream wove paper, 32.8 × 20.9 cm (Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA).
- 28 Gustave Moreau, *The Poet and the Siren*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 97 × 62 cm (private collection).
- 29 Gustave Moreau, *The Poet and the Siren*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 338 × 234 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, conserved at Musée Sainte-Croix, Poitiers).
- 30 A tapestry design from a few years later is also extant: Gustave Moreau, *The Poet and the Siren*, 1896–99. Tapestry (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris).
- 31 Armand Point, *The Siren*, 1897. Oil on board, 90 × 70.5 cm (Private collection).
- 32 Giovanni Segantini, *Vanity or the Source of Evil*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 77 × 124 cm (Zurich Art Gallery, Zurich).
- 33 Giovanni Segantini, *Love at the Fountain of Life*, 1896 (Gallery of Modern Art, Milan).

- 34 Homer, *Odyssey* book 10.
- 35 Franz von Stuck, *Tilla Durieux as Circe*, c. 1913. Oil on canvas, 60 × 68 cm (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin).
- 36 Tilla Durieux (1880–1971) was a well-known public figure in interwar Berlin, being the first actress to perform Wilde's play *Salome* (1891) on stage and also playing Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's (1856–1950) play *Pygmalion* (1913). She led a colourful life, including successive marriages to the German Secessionist painter Eugen Spiro (1874–1972), the art dealer Paul Cassirer (1871–1926) and industrialist Ludwig Katzenellenbogen (1877–1944). Durieux posed for many artists, including Renoir, gaining her the reputation of being the most-painted woman of her epoch. Forced to flee Nazi persecution in the 1930s, her husband Katzenellenbogen was deported to a concentration camp.
- 37 See further Moog-Grünewald (2014: 402) on this painting.
- 38 Arnold Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso*, 1883. Tempera on wood, 102 × 147 cm (Kunstmuseum, Basel).

## Sphinx – as Mystery

For the Symbolists, the female body was much more than just an object of sexual attraction. For their idolization of that body, whether as something beautiful or as something terrible, went well beyond that seen in earlier art. In the case of some artists, it went so far as to acquire a sort of mystic inspiration. In this chapter we consider how classically based allegory and the iconography of classical art were used to express that erotic mysticism.

To begin by returning to the Italian Symbolist sculptor Bistolfi: the mystic allegories we encounter in his sculptures are rarely specific in the myths they portray, or the characters they represent. As the example encountered in the last chapter, they rather show abstract states of human nature, often – given their frequently funerary context – related to death in some way. The body has a consistently central role in expressing the mystic undertone of these allegories. Bistolfi's sculpted figures often seem to be trying to wrest themselves free of the constraints of their medium, as if expressing the soul's struggle to transcend the limitations of the physical body. One such work which articulates this literally is his *Beauty Liberated from Matter*<sup>1</sup> (1906). The sculpture was designed as a funerary monument in honour of his friend the painter Segantini (see previous chapter), who had died in 1899, and was intended for his tomb in the cemetery of St Moritz in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The town had organized a committee for the monument's erection, one of whose members, the art dealer Alberto Grubicy, recommended that Bistolfi design the monument.

The sculptor made several preparatory plaster models for the work before it was finalized, some of which are still extant, and a further version of the same composition exists in situ at the Segantini Museum in St Moritz. The sculpture depicts a standing female nude emerging – quite literally – from the large marble block out of which she has been carved. Her form pivots slightly to her right as her torso is thrust forward, her arms held straight behind her. Her

figure has a sense of dynamic motion, her long hair – still half-submerged in the marble block against which she is framed – billowing in the wind and curling up around her left arm. Her eyes closed, her face is turned upwards to the sky in an expression of ecstatic inspiration. Only her left leg is wholly visible, her foot disappearing into the marble. Bistolfi's presentation of the female body in a deliberate state of incompleteness illustrates the artist's ability to turn dull matter into beauty – and is a specific tribute to Segantini. There are inevitably overtones of the Pygmalion myth. Yet it is significant that in abstracting beauty, and the artist's desire to give it physical form, Bistolfi chooses a simple female nude. This nude does not lack eroticism, but there is a strong sense that this is not an end in itself. The eroticism of the nude has rather become the vehicle for a tribute to the artist's near mystic power to render beauty from dull matter.

In another later sculpture, *Death* (1913) – part of the sculptural group 'Life and Death: Towards the Light',<sup>3</sup> intended as part of the Abegg funerary monument in Zurich cemetery – Bistolfi similarly used the native eroticism of the female form to convey a higher spiritual meaning. His free-standing sculpture shows a woman, similarly posed to *Beauty*, though her head is this time more sharply upturned, exposing her neck, and with weight on one leg in classical contrapposto. Her arms are again held straight behind her, as if bound. A long white robe leaves only her shoulders exposed, but after the fashion of classical sculpture this clinging drapery enhances her form. Though an allegory of death, the sculpture expresses a powerful sense of longing. But longing for what? Or rather, desire for what? Again, the prominence of the nude female form in the sculpture – whose posing almost suggests she is thrusting herself upon us – has an unavoidable erotic connotation. Yet how can we understand this in the context of such a commission? Applying a literal interpretation to such eroticism would be misleading here. Instead we must see the erotic as itself a symbol in Bistolfi's work. Reframed thus, the erotic becomes a means to express a longing for life in death, where such longing is symbolized by desire.

Bistolfi's conception of the erotic as symbol speaks to the heart of how the Symbolists used sexuality in their art. This has multiple manifestations in Symbolism, but here we want to understand how that dynamic applied to the Greek body, and more particularly to the female nude as mystic epiphany. The classical metaphor the Symbolists most commonly employed to express that



epiphany was probably the sphinx, from which this chapter's title takes its name. They were fascinated by the figure of the sphinx, both for its role in Greek tragedy and myth – where it features in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as the half-woman half-beast whose riddle the future King of Thebes Oedipus must solve – and for its potential as an artistic motif. The creature plagued the city of Thebes, assailing travellers and killing all those that could not answer her riddle: 'What goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?' Oedipus defeated the sphinx and became king of Thebes by giving the correct answer as man himself, who crawls as a child, rising onto two feet as an adult, and requiring a stick as third leg in old age. The sphinx's attraction lay in her at once enigmatic, female and dangerous nature. We might then have considered her reception in the previous chapter. However, in many works of Symbolist art she acquires a significance that goes beyond that of the *femme fatale*. For the inherently mysterious quality of her myth and its riddle seemed to suggest her connection to and awareness of a world beyond our own. That sometimes made her a symbol of danger and death. But it also made her a more generic symbol of all that was mystic or supernatural.

A number of artists produced powerfully idiosyncratic interpretations of the sphinx. These variously emphasize different aspects of her personality, depending on the meaning an artist wanted to convey. Stuck frequently returned to the theme. His *Kiss of the Sphinx*<sup>4</sup> (1895) (Figure 17) demonstrates his favourite allegory of the sphinx as symbol for the overpowering sexuality of woman. In an image with strong overtones of the vampire legend, we see the crouching sphinx bent over a man whom she kisses. Her upper body and breasts are those of a beautiful woman, and her hind legs those of a beast. The man kneels before her, one arm stretched out as if a religious supplicant and the other grasping the sphinx by her neck. He seems utterly overpowered by the sphinx, and her victim. Stuck adds to the sense of foreboding by casting much of his composition in shade, and by framing the figures against his characteristic background colour scheme of red and black. Nominally bestowing a kiss, the sphinx seems more to be feeding on her prey. Stuck's painting transforms his subject into an emblem for the power, danger and mystery of female sexuality all at once. Another work which spells out this same connotation clearly is his *Sphinx*<sup>5</sup> (1901). This time he dispenses with her half-beast nature altogether, simply portraying her as a nude lying on her front



**Figure 17** Franz von Stuck, *The Kiss of the Sphinx*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

with upper body raised on her forearms, a buxom young woman with red hair. Stuck instead indicates that she is a sphinx by situating her in a starlit desert landscape and posing her in the position of the Egyptian sphinx, now drawing inspiration from this rather than her Theban incarnation. He thus makes of her a living version of the ancient monument, as if its stone had come to life. Yet her gaze is distant, faraway, as if seeing into another world, suggesting that she does not belong to our own. Stuck's sphinx, seamlessly blending her

Greek and Egyptian traditions, becomes emblem both of the erotic and of the mysterious.

This dual conception of the sphinx was one shared by other Symbolists. Of these, she had the greatest impact on Moreau; more specifically, the Neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres' (1780–1867) *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx*<sup>6</sup> (1808) particularly influenced him. Moreau returned to the myth repeatedly, for the first time in his *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, for which he earned a medal in the 1864 Salon and found an immediate buyer in Prince Napoleon (Figure 9; see discussion in Chapter 3). Several extant preparatory studies and sketches attest that he later returned to the subject in the 1880s. The 1864 painting, today in the Metropolitan Museum, focuses after Ingres primarily on the figures of Oedipus and the sphinx, in this version more monster than woman. Oedipus, a young man heroically semi-nude, leans on his spear in a landscape reminiscent of Mantegna, where the remains of the sphinx's less fortunate victims are visible below. The sphinx has leapt up to cling to Oedipus' chest, her face close to his. A duel of wills ensues, each staring the other down. Moreau described the painting in his private notebook:

The painter imagines man as having attained the serious and momentous hour of his life and finding himself in the presence of the eternal enigma. She clutches him in an embrace with her terrible claws – but the pilgrim, noble and calm in his moral power, regards her without trembling. She is the earthly chimera, vile as all matter and attractive nonetheless – represented by this charming head and the wings of the ideal, but with the body of a monster, of the carnivore who rips apart and annihilates. But the strong and firm soul defies the monster's bestialities. Man, [strong] and firm, defies the enervating and brutal blows of matter. With his eyes fixed on the ideal, he proceeds confidently towards his goal after having trampled her under his feet.<sup>7</sup>

The painting is less hieratically dense than many of Moreau's other works, allowing maximal focus on the myth's protagonists. The sphinx clearly betrays Ingres' influence, who had similarly emphasized her bestial nature. Moreau also borrows Ingres' focus on the duel of wills between hero and sphinx, but shifts the focus to physical combat where Ingres' painting had focused more on the act of riddle-solving itself.<sup>8</sup> In both paintings, however, Oedipus emerges as undisputed victor.

Moreau revisited the subject in a different light in 1886, refocusing instead on the sphinx's triumph over her victims. *The Victorious Sphinx*<sup>9</sup> (1886) shows her sat proudly like a lion atop a rock from which the corpses of her unfortunate victims hang in ghastly fashion. Though she has a beautiful face and long golden hair she is otherwise more beast than woman, her great green wings spread behind her. Immediately below her, the body of a pallid male nude hangs in a posture reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion, blood oozing from a wound where the sphinx's claw still rests. Another corpse hangs to his right, with a further bloody heap of figures below. Set against sea and stormy sky, the watercolour depicts a terrible scene. This is the world of the female monster triumphant, before the advent of the male hero. But considered together, the last two paintings demonstrate the myth's dual appeal to Moreau. For it had both the didactic potential to show the ultimate victory of the moral (and masculine) will over the destructive (and feminine) power of evil, but also the aesthetic potential to illustrate the terror of evil unleashed. For Moreau, as many Symbolists, both held an equal fascination.<sup>10</sup>

Another artist whose rendition of the myth played still more on its mystic connotations was Khnopff. *The Caresses (The Sphinx)*<sup>11</sup> (1896) (Figure 18) may be the best known of his works, and is in turn a reinterpretation of Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. We might consider the painting as one Symbolist's reception of a classical myth refracted through that of another. Her eyes closed in ecstasy, the sphinx – now entirely a leopard save for her female face and red hair – nestles up to Oedipus, an androgynous half-nude male. In a curious inversion of his model, Khnopff transforms Moreau's fateful duel of wills into an apparently friendly and intimate encounter.<sup>12</sup> Oedipus leans towards the sphinx, who paws at him affectionately. This bizarre scene is set against an imagined ancient Mediterranean landscape, featuring poplar trees, a valley, a river and mountains. The sphinx crouches on a stone slab, behind which we see temple walls adorned with what appears to be a Kabbalist inscription. What does this more consensual depiction of Oedipus, the leopard sphinx and the accompanying symbolism mean? Khnopff is deliberately enigmatic, and we are left without any clear answers. In the journey from Moreau's Oedipus of the 1860s to Khnopff's of the 1890s, we may trace an evolution of the sphinx as mystic symbol. In that journey the Greek body has developed from simple symbol of (feminine) evil to a far more ambiguous icon, a key initiating



**Figure 18** Fernand Khnopff, *The Caresses (The Sphinx)*. Courtesy Getty – SuperStock.

us into greater mysteries, whose fundamental nature – whether benevolent or malevolent – remains unclear.

Classical sculpture had a special resonance for Khnopff. This was not limited to a simple aesthetic admiration for its form. Indeed it seems to have extended beyond this to attributing it with a certain talismanic quality and a series of indefinite mystic associations. His love affair with one particular ancient sculpture, the winged head of Hypnos, the ancient Greek god of sleep, is apparent in several works. Numerous ancient copies of the same design exist, all apparently imitating an original Greek fourth-century bronze of the god's head with one wing attached to its side (referencing his winged nature in Greek mythology). It is no exaggeration to describe Khnopff's interest in this sculpture as an obsession. It is unknown how many copies of the ancient sculpture he made himself, or had made for him. Photographic evidence of the artist's studio attests to his having owned at least two variants.<sup>13</sup> He even had an altar to Hypnos, and the sculpture features in the background of his painting *I Lock My Door upon Myself*<sup>14</sup> (1891). But two works separated by a few years show his interest in the Hypnos sculpture particularly strongly: the drawings known simply as *A Blue Wing*<sup>15</sup> (1894) and *White, Black and Gold*<sup>16</sup> (1901). *A Blue Wing* shows a marble copy of the sculpture, its wing in this case painted blue, placed on a blue cloth on a table. In the background a beautiful red-haired young woman in a white robe, her face turned to the left, also sports a blue veil. This is draped over her head such that it conceals her right ear – suggesting a correspondence to the blue-coloured wing of the sculpture, which also conceals its ear. The mysterious woman raises her hand to the veil as if about to draw it across her face. The drawing's colour scheme is limited to blue,

ochre and white, and the woman is of the Pre-Raphaelite type characteristic of Khnopff's work. The artist revisited the same composition in his later pastel drawing *White, Black and Gold*. At first sight near-identical, it depicts the same sculpture in the foreground, and the same woman in the background. However, as per its title, the colour scheme is different, with variations in the detail. The most notable of these is in the head of Hypnos itself, which Khnopff has deliberately modelled after the sculpture's variant ancient copies. Howe (1982: 112) summarizes:

Upon closer examination, there are numerous differences between the two works. The most obvious is that the *Une Aile Bleue* is in color and painted in oils, and *Blanc, Noir et Or* is an almost monochrome pastel. The *Hypnos head* in the former is fleshy and quite close to the fourth century B. C. bronze in the British Museum after which it is modelled. In contrast, the *Hypnos head* in *Blanc, Noir et Or* is much more severe and classical.

But why this obsession with the Hypnos head, and what is the connection with the mysterious woman? In the other work mentioned above, *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, we find the same strong association between the sculpture and a beautiful but mysterious woman. In that painting, replete with symbols of death and the world beyond, the sculpture appears to act as a symbol for the soul. Hypnos may have a similar significance in the two drawings. If so, this would suggest that in their case the association between the woman and the sculpture is intended to be read not only compositionally, but semantically too. She would then also be a symbol for the soul. Her distant and mysterious gaze (as that of Stuck's sphinx) suggests her connection to another world – as does her veil, given its direct compositional correspondence to Hypnos' wing, through whose flight we are transported to the world of sleep and dreams (that of his brother Morpheus in Greek mythology).

Finally, no discussion of the sphinx in Symbolism should omit to mention Redon. Generally more focused on her Egyptian incarnation, he treated the subject more than once. His interpretations are at least as creative as those we have considered here, arguably none more so than his *Red Sphinx*<sup>17</sup> (1910–12). Indeed this work is so abstract as to disengage from the body altogether. While not, then, of primary interest to us here, it does show how by the end of our period the sphinx had acquired a symbolic significance independent of its

actual myth. Redon's painting is almost a pure abstraction of colour, mostly blue, red, gold and green, although black and other colours also feature in smaller measure. On closer inspection indefinite forms can be made out, principally those of flowers – such as we saw in his *Pandora* – and butterflies. The red form in the composition's lower left appears to outline a sphinx. As such the painting realizes Redon's (1922: 18) later summary of his artistic ambitions, when he first arrived in Paris: 'I would prefer to attempt the representation of imaginary things which haunt me.' Indeed Redon's approach to depicting the sphinx here begins to foreshadow the end of Symbolism and the beginnings of greater abstraction – so much so that some, beginning with Redon himself, have mused upon the title's relevance. As Gamboni and Whitall (2011: 292) have argued: 'Redon's attitude towards titles and designations can ... appear ambivalent or even contradictory, depending on the context or the persons involved ... *The Red Sphinx*, was "very simply a coincidence of harmonies that scarcely sustains the allegorical title".' But Redon's close association of mythological symbol and colour abstraction demonstrates something fundamental about the Symbolist understanding of both. For myth and art, properly articulated and understood, could be keys in connecting to another inner world. This may be a difficult concept for the modern observer to grasp – nor was it immediately comprehensible to a majority of the Symbolists' contemporaries. But it is significant that Redon and many other Symbolists chose the sphinx as the vehicle to express this mystery, even in such impenetrable compositions.

The Symbolist quest was ultimately about rendering the invisible visible. The female nude was so important in realizing that aim because its eroticism was equally physical and immaterial. That physicality could be imitated in their art without difficulty. Yet its power seemed to extend beyond the material world too, to be eternal and indefinable. The Greek body, and its mythological incarnations, were emblematic of this truth. Despite its cold surface, there was immortal life in the marble. For the eroticism of the female body had not died, and could never die – it would ever be renewed. The works in this chapter show that from an initial interest in her mythological narrative, from Moreau onwards the sphinx was quickly abstracted by the Symbolists as a symbol of undying sexuality. Stuck made that literal, reviving the sphinx as living, breathing woman, while Khnopff's unsettling works belie



the Symbolists' enduring awe before her power and Redon's illustrate how the sphinx's symbolism ultimately departed the body altogether. But the Symbolists' fascination with the erotic was not limited to the female, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## Notes

- 1 Leonardo Bistolfi, *Beauty Liberated from Matter* (also known as *The Alp*), 1906. Marble sculpture, 180 × 150 × 180 cm (Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome).
- 2 Bistolfi also designed a second monument in honour of Segantini in 1909.
- 3 Leonardo Bistolfi, *Death*, 1913 (Museo Civico e Gipsoteca Bistolfi, Casale Monferrato). A gesso preparatory model for this work also exists in the Wolfsonian Collection in Genoa.
- 4 Franz von Stuck, *The Kiss of the Sphinx*, 1895. Oil on canvas (Museum of the Fine Arts, Budapest).
- 5 Franz von Stuck, *Sphinx*, 1901. Oil on canvas, 79 × 152 cm (Villa Stuck, Munich).
- 6 Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx*, 1808. Oil on canvas, 189 × 144 cm (Louvre, Paris).
- 7 Cited by Becker (2016).
- 8 Becker (2016) summarizes: 'Where Ingres's Oedipus self-confidently dominates the encounter, Moreau's Oedipus remains still as the Sphinx lunges aggressively towards him, her long, curved claws scratching Oedipus's chest.'
- 9 Gustave Moreau, *The Victorious Sphinx*, 1886. Watercolour on paper, 31.5 × 17.5 cm (private collection).
- 10 Moreau also depicted Oedipus' encounter with the sphinx in a further oil painting from the 1880s, where the episode is an allegory of mortality: Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus the Wayfarer (or Equality before Death)*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 124 × 93 cm (Musées de la Cour d'Or, Metz). See also: Gustave Moreau, *The Sphinx Defeated*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 105 × 62 cm (private collection).
- 11 Franz von Stuck, *The Caresses (The Sphinx)*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 50 × 150 cm (Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique, Brussels).
- 12 Although Facos (2009: 136) chooses a different interpretation of the encounter: 'With raised haunches and close eyes, the creature tries to charm the youthful, androgynous Oedipus, whose impassive expression expresses his moral resolve.'
- 13 See further Howe (1982: 112).



- 14 Fernand Khnopff, *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 72 × 140 cm (Neue Pinakothek, Munich).
- 15 Fernand Khnopff, *A Blue Wing*, 1894. Platinotype enhanced with blue and red/pink pencil on photographic paper, mounted on cardboard, 33.2 × 14.5 cm (Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique, Brussels).
- 16 Fernand Khnopff, *White, Black and Gold*, 1901. Pastel, watercolour and gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 90 × 30 cm (Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique, Brussels).
- 17 Odilon Redon, *Red Sphinx*, 1910–12. Oil on canvas, 61 × 49.5 cm (private collection).



## Part Two

# The Male Body



## Endymion – as Idol

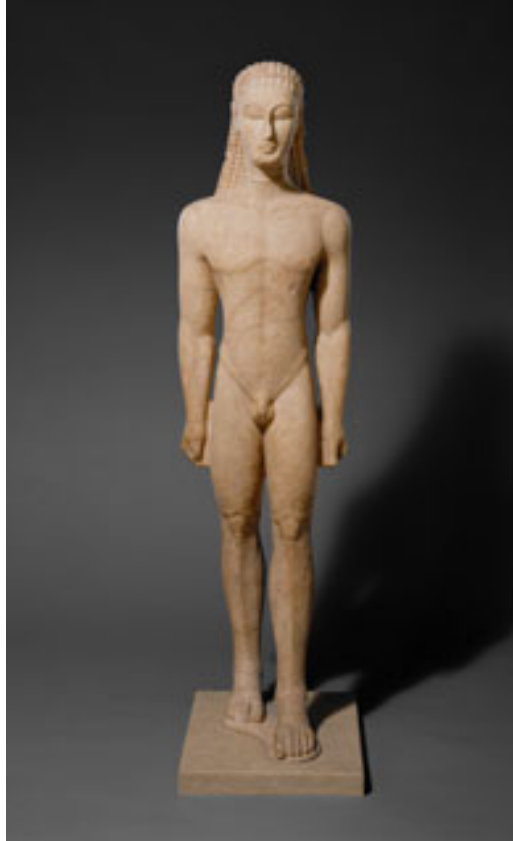
The Symbolist interest in the Greek body was not exclusive to the female. In the second part of this book, we look at how the Symbolists transformed the male body of classical art and myth, and how they made of it too an emblem of the erotic.

The male body was inherently a thing of beauty for the Symbolists. Like that of the female body, that beauty could take many forms and acquired various meanings. And as for her, so too for him Greek sculpture provided ready-made paragons. In this chapter we first consider how the Symbolists translated the Greek male into erotic idol. We must see this primarily in the context of their Neoclassical artistic education, which naturally gave them the awareness of and propensity to turn to ancient Greece as a source for models of male beauty. Moreover, continuity between these and the previous chapters may be found in the primarily heterosexual masculine interests of Symbolist artists, where it is resultantly unsurprising that the male body and classical allegories expressing it are mediated through the prism of male sexuality towards woman. The next chapter explores this in more depth. However, this heterosexual interpretation of the male body is not universal in Symbolism. A strongly homoerotic element is evident in some works too, manifesting itself in a fascination with the androgyne (particularly in Moreau's painting). The following chapter therefore explores the role the Greek body played here too.

Endymion, the beautiful youth loved by the moon goddess Selene in Greek myth (later associated to goddess of the hunt and moon Artemis), had been a conventional subject through which to celebrate male beauty since the Renaissance. Enamoured of the sleeping shepherd, Selene (/Artemis) requested the king of the gods Zeus to grant him eternal youth and – in some accounts – eternal sleep. Certain Symbolists now revisited the subject. They did so with their characteristic novelty and inventiveness, but nonetheless retained a central

interest in the beauty of the sleeping youth. The Russian Symbolist Nikolai Kalmakov's (1873–1955) *Artemis and the Sleeping Endymion*<sup>1</sup> (1917) is perhaps one of the clearest expressions of this erotic idolization. A largely self-taught artist, the painter, sculptor, designer and illustrator Kalmakov is known for his paintings of *femmes fatales* and demons, many of which illustrate classical myths. His works employ strong colours (particularly blue) and elaborate shapes and patterns, reflecting his earlier career as a theatre set designer.<sup>2</sup> In an unconventional choice of format, he places the figures of Endymion, the goddess Artemis and Endymion's hunting dog in a tondo, using the circular format to convey the sense of Artemis descending from the sky. Reclining in the lower section of the tondo as he sleeps, we see Endymion's beautiful nude form, the fine effeminate features of his face upturned to the sky as his head falls back. Kalmakov stylizes his hair in tight ringlets after the fashion of an archaic Greek kouros statue (Figure 19).<sup>3</sup> This reflects a broader interest in the kouros among his Russian contemporaries, with similar imitation in the work of the Art Nouveau set and costume designer Leon Bakst<sup>4</sup> (1866–1924) (see also discussion of Valentin Serov (1865–1911) below). Stretched across the tondo's upper section, the goddess descends from the sky above, eyes fixed on Endymion in an intense expression of longing. Her form is largely concealed in a pattern of black rings and lines, reflecting her divine flight through the clouds, while her dark hair, stylized in endless curls, extends below into a magic blue cloud embowering the sleeping youth. Endymion's dog sits up, alert, unlike his master, to her coming. Increasing the composition's sense of dynamic motion, Kalmakov sets a vortex of deep blue clouds in the centre, reflecting Petrova's comment that his work 'combines features of Russian Neo-classicism and Art Nouveau, with its tendency for overt decorativism' (Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei and Petrova 2001: 229).

This novel interpretation of the Endymion myth is interesting for its strongly Symbolist quality. Endymion's distinct appearance – the combination of tanned musculature, curly hair and effeminate face – shows an attachment to a particular kind of male beauty recurrent in Symbolism. This is one originally found in Greek literature, where it tends to characterize the demi-god offspring of the Olympians or those mortals they most loved.<sup>5</sup> It had a special appeal in turn for the Symbolists. For some it was a metaphor for the mystic power of beauty itself, something which – as in Greek myth – bridged



**Figure 19** Archaic Greek kouros sculpture of sixth century B.C. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – Fletcher Fund, 1932.

the worlds of the mortal and the divine. Endymion was a favourite in this respect, but he was by no means the only male figure from classical mythology so used. The myth of Amor (Cupid) and Psyche, as told by the second-century North African Roman author Apuleius in his satirical novel the *Metamorphoses*,<sup>6</sup> also had a strong appeal for many Symbolists. Apuleius' narrative tells of a beautiful princess Psyche admired by many instead of Venus, who, taking umbrage, dispatches Cupid to get revenge. But the latter clumsily scratches himself with one of his own arrows, falling in love with Psyche and disobeying his mother. Meanwhile, after receiving an oracle, Psyche's father exposes her to die but she is instead swept up by the West Wind

to a magic palace where Cupid secretly impregnates her. Her jealous sisters put her up to killing the invisible Cupid, but in fright on seeing him she wounds herself on one of his arrows, falling in love with him in turn. Psyche then wanders the wilderness facing various trials at Venus' behest, completing these with the aid of the other gods. After falling into a deep sleep in the underworld she is awoken by Cupid, who takes her to Olympus, where they are sacredly wed and she receives immortality. While the Symbolists were not the first to depict it, and were not alone among their contemporaries in doing so, this allegory of love and the soul naturally appealed to the Symbolists with their deep interest in the unconscious. For as Endymion, Amor and Psyche gave literal articulation to their deeply felt conviction of the eternality of the erotic and of beauty.

Several Symbolists focused on the figure of Cupid himself as paragon of the youthful male, and bodily symbol of divine beauty. Vedder's *Superest Invictus Amor* ('Love Ever Present')<sup>7</sup> (1889) is one such example. The alternative title *Omnia Vincit Amor* ('Love Conquers All') references the words of the Roman poet Cornelius Gallus in Virgil's *Eclogues*,<sup>8</sup> as well as a painting of the same name by the Italian Renaissance artist Caravaggio (1571–1610) depicting Cupid. In Vedder's painting the nude Cupid stands atop a stone sculpture in a garden in summer. The sculpture shows the two-faced classical god Janus, his faces here those of a young and an old man. Cupid's contrapposto stance is reminiscent of Praxiteles' *Hermes Sauroktonos*, where the influences of Donatello's (c. 1386–1466) c. 1435–40 and Andrea del Verrocchio's (1435–88) 1473–75 respective interpretations of David, a beautiful youth similarly posed with right hand on hip, can also be detected.<sup>9</sup> Leaning on his bow with arrow in hand, Cupid sports a white cloak strung across his shoulders. He has a white-and-yellow halo and is framed against his red wings, which rise symmetrically behind him. The result is something like a classical subject in Christian dress. Yet, as so many of Vedder's Neoclassical paintings, the image is otherwise quite conventional. It is rather the context that makes this image Symbolist. For Cupid does not feature within a mythological narrative, but has instead been transposed to an Italian garden amid ruins, as if he were a statue. But he is not a statue, but rather a living, breathing being. There are analogies to Böcklin's *Abandoned Venus* (see Chapter 2). It is clear we are not in some classical or mythological past, but in a villa in Italy. As Böcklin, Vedder implies



a chance meeting with a statue of love that is somewhat more real than we had expected. But Böcklin's subtler suggestion of divinity is now made explicit. There are again overtones of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth, but the message is the same: the ancient gods, most of all those of love, are not dead but alive and well. Vedder's painting shows how the male body could express that message just as well as the female.

Dijkstra (1986: 200) found in Vedder's image the intention to convey an ideal of 'a sensuous purity in young male bodies which seemed to put the lush contours of woman to shame', and 'one of the most elegant, most subtly erotic versions of the ephebe-equals-woman theme in late nineteenth-century art'. This obsession with the beauty of the *ephebe*, an ancient Greek term for a pubescent adolescent at the first onset of manhood,<sup>10</sup> is found elsewhere in Symbolist art but is particularly prominent in portrayals of Cupid. Klinger was also fascinated by Apuleius' tale and its symbolic potential. Dedicated to Brahms, his Opus V contains the series 'Etchings for Apuleius' Fairy Tale Amor and Psyche'<sup>11</sup> (c. 1880), which illustrates forty-six episodes from the narrative in close detail. In several of these Klinger conceptualizes Cupid as erotic ideal. One example is Cupid's initial discovery of the sleeping Psyche. He has just landed on the terrace outside her chamber, his wings still partially spread as he draws back the curtain to peep in at her. Psyche is concealed from sight, focusing the entire composition on the figure of Cupid himself. A handsome and muscular young man with dark hair, he appears to us in profile as he tiptoes into Psyche's chamber, his arm stretched out tentatively. Klinger's Amor and Psyche etchings are a curiosity in the wider body of his illustrated work, being the only print cycle depicting an identifiable literary text. He later expressed his frustration at being so constrained, citing the work as the reason he never undertook direct illustration again.<sup>12</sup> Some, such as Meissner (Meissner and Klinger 1897: 56), have as a result seen it as anomalous.<sup>13</sup> Yet the exceptionality of the artist's treatment of the myth may indicate its special significance. Given the centrality of the erotic and the figure in his work, the series provided ample scope for the expression of both. The illustration examined is typical of Klinger in its subtle eroticization of the Greek body. And it demonstrates that he could achieve this with the male, as well as the female, body.<sup>14</sup>

Narcissus was another figure drawn from classical mythology who enjoyed a certain appeal for the Symbolists as an emblem of erotic masculine beauty.

We have mentioned above (see Chapter 4) how the tragic quality of the Narcissus and Echo myth was reflected in one work by Segantini. But despite the potentially didactic qualities of Narcissus' story, illustrating as it did the dangers of vanity, the youth appealed to the Symbolists primarily as an opportunity to represent male beauty in an idealized form. Narcissus was ever in the back of the minds of the Symbolists.<sup>15</sup> And some showed an interest in Echo too, the nymph that loved Narcissus.<sup>16</sup> As to Cupid, Vedder similarly turned to Narcissus as a paragon of male beauty. His *Narcissus*<sup>17</sup> (undated) is an imagined portrait of the youth's head, a study in the idealized beauty of the male face after classical sculpture. Accordingly he has a straight aquiline nose and facial plane, small mouth, and hair falling on his brow in tight curls bound with a golden fillet (the classical headband worn during religious ceremonies). A hint at the mythological narrative remains in his proud melancholic expression, but Vedder's real interest here is in male beauty itself, for which that narrative is only a pretext. It cannot be argued that there is anything especially Symbolist about this painting, but it is interesting for how it captures succinctly that feminine cast of the male Greek body that was so beloved of the movement's artists.

Klinger took a different approach to the myth. He represented it in two drawings for the series *Opus II: Rescues of Ovid's Victims* (1879) (see above): *Narcissus and Echo 1*<sup>18</sup> and *Narcissus and Echo 2*.<sup>19</sup> The first is a scene divided into three episodes, over the course of which – unlike in Ovid's account – Narcissus is ultimately reconciled to Echo's love and they are happily united as a couple. Beyond the foreground where two satyrs sit, we see Narcissus and Echo on the far side of a lake against a sunlit wooded landscape, the episodes sequenced from left to right. In the leftmost scene, Narcissus turns away from Echo as she pursues him. By the middle scene, he is now happier with her presence, as she kneels beside him, while in the final rightmost scene they kiss and embrace, finding love together at last. The second illustration, clearly intended to follow on chronologically, simply shows a pool, from which a few rushes protrude, a shoreline, and a forest and hills behind. Narcissus and Echo do not themselves feature in the scene, but we see their abandoned clothes on the shore and the implication is clear. As ever in Klinger's art, the border decoration is intended as an aid to interpretation for the main scene, where flowers symbolize fertility and love. His recasting of Narcissus and Echo's story

is of course intended satirically, consistent with his reinterpretations of Ovid's other tales. Given the story's traditional association with the perils of vanity, there is something inevitably ridiculous about literally spelling out its logical alternative. Klinger deliberately denudes the story of its essential power. It is hard to pin down his exact motivations for this, but it is likely he did so simply for its own sake, given his penchant for the ridiculous. We have seen after all that he complained about the constraints of following a given narrative in the case of illustrating Amor and Psyche. But Echo's prominence in Klinger's take on the myth is a reminder that, whatever their intent, the Symbolists were also interested in female infatuation with male beauty. As we have seen in earlier chapters, we are often concerned with the opposite, but this is by no means exclusive.

The Czech Preisler returned repeatedly to the beauty of the male body. We will encounter further examples, but one of his works which demonstrates well how this ideal was not exclusive to French, German and American Symbolists is his *Allegory of Air*<sup>20</sup> (c. 1900). A student of the school of the influential Czech Symbolist sculptor Josef Myslbek (1848–1922), Preisler was deeply immersed in the classics. He was himself highly influential for his Czech contemporaries, ultimately becoming what has been considered (Wittlich 1982: 16) the 'model artist of the whole (Czech) Secessionist movement'. As well as directly depicting Greek myth, many of Preisler's works are abstract allegories which draw heavily on classical iconography. The composition of his *Allegory of Air*, a design for the decoration of a chateau in the Czech town of Nové Město nad Metují, centres around the figure of a beautiful half-nude male, striding through an Arcadian setting. Of the same type as Vedder's Narcissus, he presents an idealized and classical concept of the male, masculine in power but feminine in beauty. With bow slung across his back he is clearly a hunter, perhaps Actaeon. A white deer bounds through the summer landscape behind, mirroring the movement of the youth's body. This particular allegory is characteristic of the artist's ability to synthesize the essence of classical iconography in works of a less defined and more Symbolist nature. In Preisler, as other Symbolists, specific mythological narratives may recede into the background without losing their overshadowing presence. That presence can continue to suggest qualities about figures and landscapes – though, as in Segantini's *Vanity*, this ultimately relies on the observer's familiarity with those background narratives.

Such interest in feminized male beauty could go further still. In Chapter 8 we consider the androgyne, the wholly feminized male. But the classical paragons of male beauty of interest to the Symbolists were not limited to those drawn from myths explicitly about love, such as we have encountered so far – Endymion, Cupid and Psyche, and Narcissus. The Symbolists also retained a strong interest in the heroes of classical myth and literature. Staples of Neoclassicism, their interpretation in Symbolist art – including their use in the articulation of the male body – took a new and different turn. One such example was the Hercules myth, which Moreau in particular returned to repeatedly (we have already encountered one instance). Since the discovery of the Farnese Hercules in the Renaissance, the fantastical labours of the hero of Greek myth had been a favourite subject for both painters and sculptors. In Moreau's *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*<sup>21</sup> (1875/76) (Figure 20) – which he exhibited in the 1876 Salon after six years' absence – he treated one of the hero's labours: that in which he slayed the many-headed snake monster the Hydra. We see the monster rising in a dark gorge, surrounded by its victims, some of its jaws still dripping with their blood. But, stood valiantly to the left, Hercules fearlessly stares down the Hydra. His body faces us, miraculously lit up in the darkness (the sun is already setting), while his handsome face is shown in profile. Moreau gives him various attributes, including an oriental crown and a red-and-gold bow and quiver. And in his hand he holds the pelt of the Nemean lion, the fearsome beast he slew discharging his first labour. But despite his muscular torso, the features of his face are again feminine, something echoed even more strongly in the pallid corpse of a beautiful male strewn across the painting's foreground. Moreau had also painted Hercules discharging another of his labours a few years earlier in his *Hercules and the Stymphalian Birds*<sup>22</sup> (c. 1872). Depicting the hero's sixth labour, in which he drove off a flock of fearful birds near the town of Stymphalos, the painting again portrays him as a muscular nude facing down his foe, this time with bow and arrow. Similarly posed and with similar attributes, he is again at once heroically masculine and beautifully feminine. His radiant beauty makes him seem an apparition in the murky corpse-strewn marsh of the Stymphalian birds.

The Greek god of the sun and of poetry Apollo similarly combined in his person masculine strength and feminine beauty. Moreau captured these qualities in his *Apollo Vanquishing the Serpent Python*<sup>23</sup> (1885). The myth



**Figure 20** Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*. Courtesy Art Institute, Chicago – gift of Mrs Eugene A. Davidson.

depicted is that of the god's slaying of the monster Python, which resided at Delphi (Apollo's oracle there was later named after the great serpent). An epiphany in the darkness, the god descends upon the serpent from the sky. Light blazes out behind him as behind a Baroque saint, and his flaming red hair is crowned by the halo of the sun. He holds his spear high as he poises to strike, his slender nude form skipping down through the air as his face transfixes the snake. The latter curls up in the receding darkness, cowering

before his approach. In his *Apollo*, Moreau makes male beauty itself a symbol for the triumph of light over darkness. This was a strong association for the artist, extending beyond the myth of *Apollo* itself. Another closely linked Greek myth depicted by Moreau was that of *Phaethon*, son of the sun god *Helios* (sometimes approximated to *Apollo*) and the Oceanid *Clymene*. As related by Plato and Ovid,<sup>24</sup> *Phaethon* requested to take the reins of his father's sun chariot for a day. Unable to master his father's fiery horses of the sun, he fell from the sky to his doom. Moreau's *Phaethon*<sup>25</sup> (1878) depicts the terrified hero at the moment of his downfall. We see his golden nude form in the centre of the composition, his hands, fair hair and red cloak flailing out behind him, framed by the blazing halo of the sun. He is startled at the sight of the constellations of *Leo*, a giant golden lion prancing down upon him, and the *Serpent*, an enormous black bird-headed python. The gold-and-blue jewel-encrusted chariot spins off course as the enraged horses rear up, tearing off in opposite directions. Yet despite all of this mayhem, the falling yet resplendent figure of *Phaethon* remains the compositional focus. A tragic figure in the way that *Hercules* or *Apollo* are not, he has nonetheless a heroic quality, beautiful if doomed.

Redon (1922: 63) was greatly inspired by Moreau's *Phaethon*, describing the painting in his memoirs:

A work of great calibre. I know not what memory of the fine sketches of Delacroix takes me in the presence of this brilliant page, whose daring and novelty of vision could go hand in hand with the creations of that artist.<sup>26</sup>

We have discussed Redon's admiration of Delacroix above (see Chapter 3). The latter's Louvre ceiling painting of *Apollo's* chariot of the sun had also caught Redon's imagination. He returned repeatedly to the subjects of both *Apollo* and *Phaethon's* sun chariots in several oil, pastel and watercolour studies.<sup>27</sup> In his *The Chariot of Apollo*<sup>28</sup> (1905–16) (Figure 21), the artist deliberately referenced Moreau's earlier painting of *Phaethon*. Strictly speaking not the same myth (though often treated analogously in practice), it nonetheless provided a similar opportunity to display the male body in flight. *Apollo* appears in his chariot in the lower right of the composition, unlike Moreau's *Phaethon* steadfast as he grips the reins, masterfully controlling his four horses. These crest the waves of the pink-white clouds, rising near vertically into the bright blue sky. The

painting is equally a majestic celebration of Apollo as the god of the sun, a joyous experimentation in the potential of colour (Redon only abandoned his *noirs* a few years earlier in 1900), and a tribute to both Delacroix and Moreau. As Selz (1971: 8) summarizes:

What he says of Delacroix's composition could accurately be applied to his own: 'It is the triumph of light over the shadows, the joy of broad daylight opposed to the sorrows of the night and the shadows.' It would also be possible to see in this remark a premonitory insight into the development of his own work.

However, unlike Delacroix and Moreau, Redon gives the theme his own distinctive Symbolist stamp by limiting the detail of Apollo's figure. Redon's mythological paintings often have this characteristic (we might compare his *Birth of Venus* in Figure 1). Instead the god simply appears in outline, with the same in several studies. Indeed, were it not for the solitary attributes of his



**Figure 21** Odilon Redon, *Chariot of Apollo*. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum – anonymous gift, 1927.



quiver and golden fillet, it would be difficult to know whether this was Apollo or Phaethon. Yet whether majestic god or tragic youth, the Symbolists clearly found powerful resonance in the metaphor of the male body as solar splendour.

This chapter cannot be concluded without considering one final Greek mythological hero – Prometheus. The benign Titan, stealing fire to make a gift of it to his creation man, was thereafter terribly punished by Zeus for that theft. Chained to a rock in the Caucasus mountains, he was condemned to have his innards gnawed at by a vulture for all eternity (until Hercules, paragon of mankind, freed him). This curious myth, with its symbolic chastisement of man's aspiration for novelty and magic, affected many Symbolists in a very particular way. Their characterization of Prometheus was consistently sympathetic, as they valorized his deeds and lamented his punishment. Many found in him a heroic prototype of the eternal rebel, echoing their own rebellion against the sexual constraints of bourgeois society and their longing for liberation from them. An essay on art in the Czech journal *Volné Směry* (Kotěra et al. 1900: 2) uses Prometheus as an allegory for art, and gives a good sense of how the Symbolists reimagined him:

The creator . . . was just as much the whole man in that immortal affliction, when everything hurt, as when the same Prometheus was so grandly rebelling against the gracious goodwill of Zeus. We must reiterate: from the feeling and for the feeling of strength. Thus must the poet and the nation be made . . . That strong, tough, young, unexhausted masculinity is needed throughout . . . Returning to Aeschylus' poem, we find that its subject is the struggle between two worlds, the eternal rift between the old heaven and the new world, and that a world crisis is on its way. The old, naïve, sensual view of the world is shaken, and against it rises the rebel, in the character of a benefactor. I repeat this word rebel, the mutineer, for it is what tragedy bears within it – even in its most varied forms – but in every age his mark is reborn on its brow.<sup>29</sup>

The tragedian Aeschylus' series of plays on the Titan – including his *Prometheus Bound* – were clearly influential sources for the Symbolists, but so too were their intermediate literary receptions. These included works by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) and the English poets Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) and Lord Byron (1788–1824), but also the Savoy writer and philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), the ninth dialogue of



whose *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* ('St Petersburg Evenings') (1821) had suggested the idea that Prometheus was a prefiguration of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Moreau, who owned a copy of de Maistre's text, depicted Prometheus in several paintings. The iconography of his first canvas on the theme, *Prometheus*<sup>31</sup> (1868), strongly reflects this notion of Prometheus as Christ. The painting shows the Titan as a muscular and bearded nude sat on the Caucasian rocks to which he is bound, mountains and a murky sky beyond. He looks ahead resolutely as the vulture gnaws at his innards, while another lies dead at his feet. If he is in excruciating pain, he does not let it show. The artist presented the painting at the Salon of 1869, but it was poorly received by the critics. The influential French poet and dramatist Théophile Gautier's (1811–72) opinion seems to have prevailed:

Mr Gustave Moreau has not given his Prometheus the colossal proportions of the Prometheus of Aeschylus. This is not a Titan. It is a man to whom it seems to us that the artist wanted to give some resemblance to Christ of whom – according to certain Church fathers – he is the pagan form and prediction.<sup>32</sup>

As Corbeau-Parsons (2013: chapter 1) summarizes, initial criticism of Moreau's Prometheus can in part be explained by its departure from more conventional depictions:<sup>33</sup>

The painting was first exhibited at the 1869 Salon in Paris, but it was not a great success, remaining unsold in Moreau's studio. The pictorial tradition of portraying Prometheus' punishment, especially in France, was to emphasize Prometheus' unbearable suffering, since the main focus on the Prometheus myth before the turn of the nineteenth century was on the chastisement of rebellion, from a theological and political perspective. After the striking paintings of Titian and Rubens highlighting the horror of his punishment, Prometheus was usually depicted lying on his rock, contorted with pain.

Moreau himself described his Prometheus as 'the figure of a man of sacrifice and thought at grips, in life, with the torments and attacks of brutishness, and base matter'.<sup>34</sup> Writing to a friend in a letter of October 1868, he described the Titan's fate in sympathetic terms, citing Plato:

the poetical traditions . . . all situate at the beginning of mankind a golden age from which man is rejected because of his own fault. Do I have to remind

you of the first revolt, symbolized by Prometheus? ... Talking about the moral human failing, he [Plato] says that: 'One has to blame the creator rather than the creature. Lord God of gods seeing that human beings, subject to the generations had lost (or destroyed) in them the inestimable gift, determined to subject them to a treatment that would both punish and regenerate them.' Eventually, he says this remarkable thing: 'Nature and the abilities of Man have been changed and corrupted within him as early as his birth.'<sup>35</sup>

For Moreau the figure of Prometheus had taken on a significance that went beyond the simple aesthetic opportunity the myth presented to portray the Greek body. Indeed his ambiguous reference to the 'attacks ... of base matter' implies the painting may be an allegory of man seeking to transcend his baser instincts, including his sexuality. Although the erotic does not enjoy the same obvious ubiquity in this painting that it does in Moreau's other work, here too it remains a reference point for the male body. He would return to the hero's story in two further paintings from 1869, *Prometheus Bound*<sup>36</sup> (1869) and *Prometheus Struck by Lightning*<sup>37</sup> (c. 1869), and in another later painting from the 1880s, *Prometheus*<sup>38</sup> (1880–85), each time considering it from a different angle.

Later Symbolists also engaged with the Prometheus myth in their works. While none are explicitly erotic, many reflect a preoccupation with man's inner state. Some indirectly allegorize the torments of man's instincts, idealizing his valiant struggle to transcend them. The Polish sculptor Xawery Dunikowski's (1875–1964) *Prometheus*<sup>39</sup> (c. 1900) is an interesting and original departure from Neoclassical depictions of the Titan. As Olszewski (1989: 22) relates: 'Dunikowski broke the mythological iconographic convention by imparting the vulture's role to another man who tears at the body of the hero falling into the abyss'. His sculpture, limited to Prometheus' upper torso, upended as he falls, shows his face writhing in agony as another figure crouches over his belly consuming his insides. By transforming the mythological vulture into a human being, the artist makes the Titan's fate still more cruel and bizarre than it already was, an effect clearly intended to arouse the observer's sympathy.<sup>40</sup> The Czech František Kupka (1871–1957), a Symbolist in his early phase but much better known for his later abstract work, also showed a repeated interest in the myth. His *Prometheus Blue and Red*<sup>41</sup> (1908–10) is characteristic of his creative

transformations of classical themes. Completed in bright blue and red, his watercolour presents us simply with the naked figure of Prometheus in a landscape. Heroically muscular, with long blonde hair and beard, his body is flecked with gold as if it is literally ablaze with the fire he has given mankind. Yet his fiery presence seems benevolent, bringing life to the flora around him, which responds by sprouting colourful flowers everywhere. This is Prometheus as creator and helper of mankind, an idol the artist expresses through the power of the male body.<sup>42</sup>

In this chapter we have seen how the Symbolists idolized the male Greek body, whether purely as symbol for erotic beauty or otherwise for heroic struggle. That struggle was often a metaphor for inner conflict with one's sexual instincts. But the Symbolists also entertained an aesthetic fascination with those instincts themselves. In the next chapter we therefore consider the classical allegories they used to unmask and express male sexuality.

## Notes

- 1 Nikolai Kalmakov, *Artemis and the Sleeping Endymion* (tondo in square), 1917. Oil, silver and bronze on canvas, 90 × 90 cm (State Russian Museum, St Petersburg).
- 2 This included designing sets for the Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya's (1864–1910) 1908 staging of Wilde's *Salome* and for the ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev's (1872–1929) *Ballets Russes*.
- 3 Marble statue of a kouros (youth) ('New York Kouros'), c. 590–580 BC. Marble, h. 194.6 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 4 See further my discussion in Warren (2017: 119–21).
- 5 The classical myth which arguably articulates this most clearly is that of Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes (Statius, *Achilleid* 1.675–818). Knowing that her son would die if he fought at Troy, Achilles' mother Thetis disguised him as a girl and placed him in King Lycomedes' care. Odysseus ultimately managed to identify Achilles by placing weapons before him. The myth demonstrates Achilles' simultaneously feminine and masculine qualities.
- 6 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* books 4–6.
- 7 Elihu Vedder, *Superest Invictus Amor* ('Love Ever Present', or *Omnia Vincit Amor*, 'Love Conquers All'), 1889 (Brooklyn Museum, New York).
- 8 Virgil, *Eclogue* 10.69. Gallus, famous in his time but whose works are not extant, is made lovelorn protagonist by his friend Virgil in a poem set in an imaginary Arcadia.

- 9 These Italian High Renaissance sculptures would have been well-known to the majority of Symbolist artists as a staple of their Academic education.
- 10 The *ephebe* is frequently referenced in Attic vase painting.
- 11 Max Klinger, 'Etchings for Apuleius' Fairy Tale Amor and Psyche', Opus V a + b, c. 1880. Etching and aquatint, forty-six plates (fifteen *hors-texte* and thirty-one vignettes on *chine appliqué*).
- 12 Klinger et al. (1977: 39).
- 13 See also Grieb (1981) for a more detailed discussion of the cycle.
- 14 Cupid appears in passing elsewhere in Klinger's work, including in the last illustration of the *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove*. Cupid also makes an occasional satirical appearance as a child in Rops' work, for example: Félicien Rops, *Venus and Cupid: Love Blowing his Nose*, c. 1878. Pastel and gouache over black chalk, 21.8 × 14.8 cm (Félicien Rops Provincial Museum, Namur).
- 15 One Symbolist theorist, the French poet and writer Camille Mauclair (1872–1945), even employed Narcissus as an artistic metaphor in his theory of art. Defining his concept of artistic 'synthetism', Mauclair wrote in the *Mercure de France* (Aurier 1892: 44): 'Finally, the being that rises from real knowledge to ideal knowledge is a synthetist of art, a re-creator reflecting his consciousness in his actions – the work is the act of art – and reflecting his acts in his consciousness too, as Narcissus.' ('L'être enfin qui s'élève de la connaissance réelle à la connaissance idéale est un synthétiste d'art, un créateur reflétant sa conscience en ses actes – l'oeuvre est l'acte d'art – et reflétant aussi ses actes dans sa conscience, comme Narcisse')
- 16 A nymph unable to articulate sounds herself, only able to echo back what others said (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.339–58).
- 17 Elihu Vedder, *Narcissus*, undated. Oil on board, 30.5 × 24.1 cm (private collection).
- 18 Max Klinger, *Narcissus and Echo 1*, 1879. Etching and aquatint, 29.7 × 41.2 cm (Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de la Ville de Strasbourg, Strasbourg).
- 19 Max Klinger, *Narcissus and Echo 2*, 1879. Etching and aquatint, 29.9 × 20.9 cm (Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de la Ville de Strasbourg, Strasbourg).
- 20 Jan Preisler, *Allegory of Air*, c. 1900. Tempera on paper, 23 × 35 cm (private collection).
- 21 Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, 1875/76. Oil on canvas, 179.3 × 154 cm (Art Institute, Chicago).
- 22 Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Stymphean Birds*, c. 1872. Oil on panel, 19 × 28.5 cm (The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, New York).
- 23 Gustave Moreau, *Apollo Vanquishing the Serpent Python*, 1885. Oil on canvas (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).
- 24 Plato, *Timaeus* 22; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.751ff.

- 25 Gustave Moreau, *Phaethon*, 1878. Oil on canvas (Louvre, Paris).
- 26 'Un ouvrage de haute portée. Je ne sais quel souvenir des belles ébauches de Delacroix me prend en présence de cette page éclatante dont l'audace et la nouveauté de la vision pourraient aller de pair avec les créations de ce maître.'
- 27 Sterling and Salinger (1960: 19).
- 28 Odilon Redon, *The Chariot of Apollo*, 1905–16. Oil on canvas, 66 × 81.3 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 29 'Tvůrce . . . byl stejně celý muž v tom nesmrtelném lkaní, kdy všechno bolí, jako když později tak grandiosně rebelsky opřel téhož Promethea milostivé ochotě Zevově. Jest nutno opakovat: z pocitu a pro pocit síly. Musí tak býti stvořen básník a musí býti takým národ . . . Třeba tu silné, tvrdé, mladé, nevyčerpané mužnosti na celé čáře . . . Vracejice se k básni Aischylově, shledáváme, že jejím obsahem jest zápas mezi dvěma světy, že nastala pořádná trhlina mezi starým nebem a novou zemí, a že světová krise jest v chodu. Starý, naivní, smyslový názor světa se viklá a proti němu zvedá se a tyčí nový v postavě vzdorujícího dobrodince – rebela. Opakuji toto slovo rebel, vzbouřenec, neboť ono jest, které tragedie nese, byť i v nejrozumnějších formách, ale každou dobou obrozeno jeho znamení na svém čele.'
- 30 Corbeau-Parsons (2013: chapter 1).
- 31 Gustave Moreau, *Prometheus*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 205 × 122 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 32 Cited at <http://musee-moreau.fr/objet/promethee> (accessed 16 May 2019).
- 33 See Deshairs' (1913: 45–6) summary of contemporary reactions, positive and negative.
- 34 Cited in Corbeau-Parsons (2013: chapter 1).
- 35 Cited in Corbeau-Parsons (2013: chapter 1).
- 36 Gustave Moreau, *Prometheus Bound*, 1869 (private collection). Moreau inscribed in gold letters at the bottom of the canvas, 'Videte quanta patior a Deo Deus' ('Though god myself, see what great things I suffer from god'), the famous opening words of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. De Maistre had also quoted these words in his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.
- 37 Gustave Moreau, *Prometheus Struck by Lightning*, c. 1869. Oil on canvas, 260 × 137 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 38 Gustave Moreau, *Prometheus*, 1880–85. Watercolour, 18 × 11 cm (Private collection).
- 39 Xawery Dunikowski, *Prometheus*, 1898. Patinated plaster sculpture (National Museum, Warsaw). From the cycle of works 'Man'.
- 40 Olszewski (1989: 22) describes Dunikowski's sculptures as 'generalizations of man's destiny since their principal hero is a man whose somewhat deformed

shape, effaced in details, enhances their power of expression.' Szubert (1995: 56) argues that the sculpture's significance is more personal and can be read 'as a vision of the fate of the artist'.

41 František Kupka, *Prometheus Blue and Red*, 1908–10 (original version 1908).

Watercolour on paper, 32 × 29 cm (National Gallery, Prague).

42 Kupka returned to Prometheus' myth again in thirty-six etchings and aquatints for an edition of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in 1911. We might also compare Klinger's portrayal of the Titan in his Brahms Fantasy, distraught just after his liberation by Hercules: Max Klinger, *Prometheus Freed*, 1894. Etching, engraving, aquatint and mezzotint, 27.6 × 36.2 cm (Houghton Library, Harvard College Library).

## Faun – as Instinct

Mallarmé's poem *The Afternoon of a Faun* had pictured the faun – the notoriously frisky goat-man of classical mythology – freely pursuing nymphs in an imagined Arcadia (see introduction). In Symbolist art we have already encountered the faun in Rops' work. This chapter looks in closer detail at some of the ways in which the Symbolists portrayed male sexuality. We focus on the faun because it, together with the analogous half-man half-goat satyr and the Greek goat-god Pan, was the most common metaphor for man's sexual instincts. Its use was idiosyncratic to individual artists, but more often than not the metaphor served to venerate rather than decry sexuality.

Mallarmé's poem inspired several works in the visual arts, and its deep impact on the Symbolist imagination can hardly be overestimated. The distinction between faun and satyr itself had become rather fine. In ancient Greek vase painting, the former generally has traits that resemble a goat and the latter a horse. But the iconography and symbolism of the two had become blended in the history of their artistic receptions, such that by the *fin-de-siècle* they were effectively used interchangeably. In Symbolism the faun/satyr has the curiosity of simultaneously signifying beauty and coarseness. He is both portrayed as revelling in his lasciviousness, and idealized as a handsome and free spirit in a natural Arcadia. As in Mallarmé, his personal drama is to be found in the (frequently fraught) quest to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable qualities. Can one be at once noble and sexually libertine? Other figures we have encountered so far draw at least partially on the mythological narratives in which they originally feature, even when removed from that context. This is less the case for the faun/satyr, which instead draws more strongly on a conventional set of associations linking it to playfulness, freedom, leisure and lovemaking. These were not new to Symbolism but are frequently

referenced in Neoclassical painting, even if obliquely – we might give as examples Adolphe Alexandre Lesrel's (1839–1929) *Pan and Venus* (1865), Pal Szinyei-Merse's (1845–1920) *Faun and Nymph* (1868) and Albert von Keller's (1844–1920) *Faun and Nymph* (1869). Burne-Jones' *Pan and Psyche* (1872–74) had also hinted strongly at the inherent sexuality of the theme. But its erotic associations found their most explicit articulation yet in Symbolist art.

A poem in *La Plume* (Boës 1902: 5–6) by the French Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier (1864–1936) gives a good idea of his contemporaries' aesthetic idealization of the faun:

Verse

With the rustic ugliness  
Of your two-horned mask  
Where the eyes mock, sidelong,  
The mouth with a cracked laugh,

With your twin horns,  
Faun, spikes upon your forehead,  
Your nose and your two ears,  
A mascarón has been made.

That we've sculpted in marble  
Of an ochre veined in blood  
Which is alike to the leaves of a tree  
Of autumn as it ends.

But already you might, in the shadow  
Of the tall pines and the cypresses,  
Before the leaf falls  
From the tops of the forest,

Come to drink at the fountain  
Where your mouth spouts a water  
Fresh, pure, smooth and healthy  
To draw when it's hot;



And you'll see in the basin  
 How you smile, in its reflection,  
 The true smile of the mask  
 Of this faun that you are!<sup>1</sup>

de R gnier's poem describing a sculpture of a faun in a fountain (of the sort ubiquitous in Rococo ornament) hints at the playfulness with which it was associated. For some this extended beyond art itself to a (frequently ahistorical) understanding of classical religion and cult that emphasized its sexual ritual, where the faun/satyr often plays a central role. A good starting point for understanding this association is Khnopff's *Paganism*<sup>2</sup> (c. 1910). His drawing is a sort of meditation on pagan religion, and more specifically on a particular verse by the French literary historian and critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–69). Editor of the journal *La Globe* ('The Globe') and Chair of Latin at the Coll ge de France in the 1850s, Sainte-Beuve had written extensively on the Renaissance and Hugo. He had also authored a *Study on Virgil* (1857), one particular observation from which was extensively cited by subsequent authors:

Immortal paganism, are you dead? They say that you are. But Pan is quietly mocking, and the siren laughing.<sup>3</sup>

Khnopff divides his drawing into upper and lower portions, each inscribed below with one part of this quotation. Above we see the head of a beautiful young woman with long black hair, her eyes closed meditatively as she faces us holding an olive branch. We cannot see the rest of her body, but her long neck implies her statuesque figure. The solemn funereal air suggests death, as per the first part of Sainte-Beuve's quotation. In contrast, the lower portion of the drawing shows Pan and the siren. Pan's face appears close-up to the left of the composition, only half-visible, but we can make out his big red beard and long ears, and one of his lecherous eyes. Immediately to the right, the siren appears in the background, a beautiful red-headed nude. She reclines on her back, turning towards us with a coquettish smile. This otherwise elusive symbolism is more intelligible when we consider Sainte-Beuve's quotation. Though the pagan world and its joyous sensuality seems dead and buried, it is not after all, as the lower portion of the drawing makes clear. Khnopff's interpretation of Sainte-Beuve seems to be that paganism lives on in our sexuality.

The Latvian Symbolist Janis Rozentāls' (1866–1916) *Women and the Spirits of Nature*<sup>4</sup> (1907) demonstrates the typical eroticism that developed around the faun/satyr. A young female blonde stands disrobed by the sea shore. A motley crew of ugly sea creatures gather at the water's edge, beholding the apparently unwonted sight of the woman. A red rose bush flowers behind her, symbolic signifier of her sexuality, while in the top right is a satyr-like creature. With two horns on his head, long ears and double-forked black beard, he crawls over the cliff's edge to peep at her. Rozentāls' painting is a curious blend of Latvian folk mythology and the classicists (Howard (1996: 194) speaks of 'an attempt by Rozentāls to classicize Latvian mythology') but in its basic conception shows the essential elements of the faun/satyr metaphor: the sexually attractive woman and the pursuing male satyr. We might compare Louis Joseph Raphael Collin's (1850–1916) *Nymph and Faun*<sup>5</sup> (date unknown), which demonstrates this still more literally, showing as it does a naked red-headed nude in a woodland glade as she flees a frustrated faun in hot pursuit, who stretches out his arms towards her in an expression of longing.

In a number of earlier paintings Böcklin had also represented Pan and the faun. These include his *Idyll (Pan amidst Columns)*<sup>6</sup> (1875), *Sleeping Diana Watched by Two Fauns*<sup>7</sup> (1877), *Spring Evening*<sup>8</sup> (1879), and *Sleeping Nymph Spied On by Two Fauns*<sup>9</sup> (1884). As his maritime mythological scenes discussed above (Chapters 2 and 3), these do not rely on any particular narrative from Greek myth, but are rather works of imagination based on a personal ideal of the faun. His *Idyll* depicts an ugly bearded Pan with ruddy skin piping away beside a pool, beneath the ruins of a temple, but has no reference point beyond this. *Spring Evening* features a similarly bearded Pan reclining on a rock amid flowers, piping away happily, while two nymphs conceal themselves in the woods nearby to listen to his music. *Sleeping Diana* and *Sleeping Nymph* relate to the same fantasy of the beautiful female discovered by the wandering male as she sleeps. These playful satires all take place in a magical Arcadian springtime, where man has no need to conceal his sexuality. Putz (1984: 224), in her study of Böcklin's classicism, speaks of the 'uncomprehending adoration of unattainable beauty' that characterizes these works, and Tagloff (2015: 1831) of how 'the fragile opposition of Goddess and creature of nature, of purity and instinct, of the sublime and the grotesque is maintained, and with the stimulation of watching something forbidden.'

Interestingly, given his otherwise strong interest in classical mythology, Moreau does not appear to have been greatly taken with the figure of the faun/satyr. Its appearance in his work is infrequent, and where it does appear it is not the central focus. One exception is his *Apollo Receiving the Shepherds' Offerings* (or *Apollo and the Satyrs*)<sup>10</sup> (c. 1885). A procession of enraptured satyrs brings rustic offerings to the deity. The latter, an androgynous youth of slender form stood atop a rock, is the main feature of the composition, while only the heads of the satyrs are visible below. The god appears in the iconography of a Christian saint, symbolically accompanied by his attributes. His head is crowned with a halo of the sun, while in his left hand he holds a great laurel branch. His existence seems to be independent of that of the satyrs. Nor, as in Moreau's *Apollo Vanquishing the Serpent*, does he exist within the context of any specific mythological narrative. A delicate, almost frail youth, he is a far cry from his incarnation there. Moreau's only real interest in the coarse satyrs is as a foil to this divine androgyne (as in his earlier *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*<sup>11</sup> (1870), discussed below). Their rugged and sometimes bellicose heterosexuality was not a masculinity that appealed to him.

As he had the female, in several works Stuck used the faun to eroticize the male body too. As faun and nymph, the two are often closely associated in an imagined sexually libertine Arcadia. His drawing *Faun with Rhython*<sup>12</sup> (1886) illustrates his basic understanding of the faun as representing playfulness, picturing him sat in a hoop facing away from us, his goat legs and cloven hooves hanging down beneath him. He holds up a Greek *rhython* cup, out of which he has pulled a large bunch of grapes and vine leaves. Stuck associates the faun with Dionysian imagery of the vine and its suggestion of revelry. However, several of Stuck's paintings also place him in more directly erotic contexts. These include his *Scherzo*<sup>13</sup> (1909) and *Faun and Water Nymph*<sup>14</sup> (1918), among many others. *Scherzo* – presents a visual equivalent to the musical term of its title, which refers to a lively or cheerful piece of music. In a dynamic scene, a golden faun presses against a red-haired female nude, who playfully pulls away from him as she tugs at one of his horns. Her glee makes her a contrast with another sullen dark-haired nymph in blue to the left, who watches the faun and reaches out towards his shoulder. Stuck avoids any narrative detail, instead focusing on a simple expression of eroticism. His *Faun and Water Nymph* presents a similar scene of a shaggy faun on the seashore

carrying a nude on his shoulders. Her hair is blown in the sea breeze as she grips his horns in delight, while the faun holds her fish legs and smiles at his discovery. One of the artist's first paintings, *Fighting Fauns*<sup>15</sup> (1889), for which he won a gold medal when he exhibited it in Munich in 1889,<sup>16</sup> had directly expressed a link between sexuality and violence. Two fauns ram their heads together in a fight over a woman, who stands at the head of a crowd beyond, watching this spectacle. Stuck would return to the same theme several times, and also explored related ideas in other works such as *The Race*<sup>17</sup> (c. 1927), a classical scene of two males racing towards a female nude.<sup>18</sup> All of these paintings are pervaded by a sense of free sexuality and of human instinct unmasked.

We have seen above how the Symbolist *femme fatale* may reflect concerns over the Freudian unconscious and unrestrained female sexuality. In contrast, Stuck's paintings celebrate the male sexual unconscious, using the Greek body to do so. But Symbolist articulations of male sexuality could be less straightforward, even fraught. As we have encountered already, the Pole Malczewski's use of classical imagery is complex, frequently combined with nationalist or folk iconography, and highly individual in meaning. Other than overtly romantic nationalist symbols, the faun is probably his favourite motif. It clearly had a special place in his heart, being the perfect symbol of man's not necessarily baser, but more genuine, nature. In Malczewski's art the faun's transposition to new contexts and juxtaposition with traditionally unrelated iconography can lead to curious results. If ever a faun looked out of place and a little awkward, it is in a Polish landscape. But this effect is often deliberate, depending on the intended message. Olszewski (1989: 17) has spoken of how in painting 'harpies, fauns, angels and Death . . . his purpose was to display things timeless, such as Art, and things ultimate, such as Death, in the atmosphere of the Polish countryside.' To take just three indicative examples we might consider his *The Vicious Circle*<sup>19</sup> (1895–97), *Self-Portrait with Fauns Tryptych*<sup>20</sup> (1906) and *Woman with Faun: Temptation*<sup>21</sup> (1918). The timelessness of the faun paralleled that of man's nature itself. The first, a helter-skelter of a painting, is an allegory of the artist's personal inspirations. Those multiple inspirations surround the artist, figuratively represented by an aerial circus of figures revolving around a young boy sat atop a ladder. Dionysian imagery plays a significant role. At the beginning of this swirl of humanity a female

nude can be seen, a Maenad clasping a leopard skin in her right hand. Next on from her is a faun, whose cloven hooves flail about in the air. A nude red-headed beauty above, another Bacchante from Dionysus' train, looks down as she blesses us. Rather incongruously, a group of happy Polish peasants in folk costume follow, and after them a great disarray of other allegorical figures, some of which are more macabre. The real world, the ideal world and the world of myth all blend together.<sup>22</sup>

His *Self-Portrait with Fauns: Triptych* is another curious work, consisting of three paintings in portrait format arranged as a triptych. The central painting is a self-portrait and the other panels each depict a faun. Each is set in the Polish landscape, as the majority of the artist's portraits are. The self-portrait is fairly unremarkable except for a metallic device that the artist wears around his head that looks like part of a helmet. In the background a woman in a white dress dances in a field of flowers on a summer evening, accompanied by an angel. The faun portrait to the left shows a young man holding a flute, sporting the same beard and moustache as Malczewski himself, just with the addition of horns. The faun portrait to the right shows an older faun with a longer unkempt beard and pointed ears, set against a rural scene where women work in the fields. Combining a self-portrait with a faun, using this to suggest parallels between his own nature and the faun's instinctual life, is an original innovation of the artist. In his later *Woman with Faun: Temptation* he extends this still further by actually painting himself as a faun, appearing from behind a bush playing the double aulos to attract the attention of a woman, pictured – as often in his paintings – as his lover Maria Balowa. His face is red and puffed up as he plays the pipe, two great horns growing out of his forehead. Both works closely associate the artist with the faun: but why this association and what does it signify? The observer is clearly expected to make a series of connections between the assumed qualities of the faun and a commentary by the artist on his own nature. Those qualities evidently include sexual desire, frivolity and a lack of control. Indeed, the second painting presents us directly with the logical consequence of this Malczewski-faun, in which the artist has simply become his Freudian 'Id', freely pursuing the object of his desire.

Malczewski's versatility in using classical allegory also extends to his nationalist painting. Born to the Polish patriot and social activist Julian Malczewski (1820–83) in Radom in Russian-controlled Congress Poland, the

artist shared the fervent nationalism of many of his contemporary Polish intellectuals and artists, and he frequently employs a forceful national symbolism in his art. Other than the erotic, the national is probably the most prominent inspiration in his work. But such national symbolism can be ambiguous, particularly where it is combined with classical – including erotic – iconography. As Howard (1996: 135) puts it:

Malczewski was responsible for an early form of national romanticism that was overtly patriotic and introspective ... Often, his morbid national and personal allegorism is stressed through the use of fantastic hybrid creatures, angels, androgynes, satyrs and fauns.

One such example is his use of the faun and similar mythological symbols in his *Law, Fatherland, Art*<sup>23</sup> (1903) (Figure 22). This is a triptych of three paintings, each a separate composition on one of the titular themes, two of which feature self-portraits of the artist in different guises. *Fatherland* is an allegorical representation of a noblewoman accompanied by a young boy and a young girl, the latter holding manacles in her hands. *Art* depicts a procession of Poles, including the artist, shown in military uniform with head bowed. Both provide reflections on Poland's national enslavement. Of most interest to us, however, is *Law*. This painting is really another self-portrait of the artist, in which he is flanked by two allegorical figures. To his right is a woman, facing in the opposite direction to the artist. Her face is livid and she leans on a scythe, an allegory of death. By contrast, to his left we see the rather different figure of a young male faun, his face red as he blows on his reed pipe. Horns sprout out of his hair, which is decked with leaves. Malczewski's gaze is fixed on him, and both figures are illuminated by light coming from above.

This may be the most symbolically dense of the artist's triptychs. It is testimony to his facility in combining classical and nationalist motifs. The *Law* and *Art* canvases evidently comment on the central panel of the triptych, depicting the Polish fatherland. It is law and art that come together to nourish the fatherland, which is diminished by their absence. Considering *Law* individually, however, it is interesting to note the allegorical opposition constructed between the faun and death, in which the artist is somehow caught between the two. The faun seems to represent life. He embodies all that the pale image of death, standing in the shadows, does not: life, lust, sun and song. Law



**Figure 22** Jacek Malczewski, *Law, Fatherland, Art*. Courtesy Wikimedia.

is, then, the balance that must be struck between life and death. But such a reading is complicated by the fact that the woman who represents death is the same woman as that in *Fatherland*. Moreover, the artist clearly turns towards the faun. There appears to be a secondary level of symbolism suggesting that *joie-de-vivre* (the faun) may be a distraction from the seriousness of the national cause (shown in *Art*). Is the artist showing remorse for his attachment to art and life when others are sacrificing themselves? The title of *Art* is telling; Malczewski's response seems to be that his artistic vocation itself makes him part of the national cause, hence his place in the procession. His use of the faun in such a context is certainly unusual. But *Law, Fatherland, Art* is not alone in this respect, for the faun also makes an appearance in Malczewski's many portraits of Polish patriots and historical figures. One example is his *The Story of a Song (Portrait of Adam Asnyk)*<sup>24</sup> (1899) (Figure 23), a posthumous portrait of the Positivist poet and dramatist Adam Asnyk (1838–97) who had taken part in the 1863 January Uprising against occupying Russian troops. The elderly Asnyk is shown as a heroic figure, his serious eyes downcast beneath a careworn and furrowed brow, as he leans on his staff. Meanwhile in a strange





**Figure 23** Jacek Malczewski, *The Story of a Song (Portrait of Adam Asnyk)*. Courtesy Wikimedia.

juxtaposition the faces of five rather ugly fauns playing reed pipes appear above him, apparently pursuing the poet. The symbolism is not immediately clear, but the fauns likely represent his poetic inspiration. Malczewski evidently saw no obstacle to using his favourite classical motif in such unlikely contexts.



The faun/satyr's erotic symbolism was definitely not always so subtle. Of all the Symbolists, Rops' portrayals of it are without doubt the most explicit. We have already seen this in his *Journey to the Land of the Old Gods*, but both the faun/satyr and Pan are very widespread in his work. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a full survey, but we will consider two indicative examples: his *Homage to Pan*<sup>25</sup> (1886) and *Satyriasis*<sup>26</sup> (undated). The first was produced by Rops as a frontispiece to Péladan's *Curieuse* (1887), the second part of the mystic's series of twenty-one volumes, *The Latin Decadence*. Péladan's work had appeared from 1884 onwards, the same year that Huysmans' *Against the Grain* was published. The text sets out the author's theories, with both the narrative and Rops' accompanying illustrations containing many scenes of sexual deviancy. As Norton (2002: 116) summarizes, this encouraged sales even if he 'pretended to deplore the symptoms of moral turpitude ... [and] insisted that the series was intended to serve as both a warning and preventive tonic'. We can cite Huysmans' (1908: 109) own description of Rops' frontispiece: 'A woman approaching a herm, putting her arms around its neck, looking at him with devouring eyes, scrutinizing the smile of his ugly mouth – a woman who seems the sister of that in the *Satanics* which leaps and claws on a sneering Hermes.'<sup>27</sup> The naked woman abandons herself to the stone herm which, though inanimate, appears somehow animated by the godhead. That impression is increased by the roots around the herm, one of which grows up phallically from its groin towards the woman.<sup>28</sup> The wreath worn by the woman implies some ancient erotic rite.<sup>29</sup> Rops stops short of making his image sexually explicit. In his *Satyriasis*, a drawing from one of his pornographic series, he does not. We see the back of a faun bent over a woman, holding her down forcefully as he copulates with her, though her expression suggests that she is enjoying the experience. Though, as Friedell (2017: 400) has put it, we might today find the image 'a bit strained and panoptic', this must be seen in the context of its time. This was the first time the Greek body had been used in such a sexually explicit way.<sup>30</sup>

In this chapter we have seen how certain Symbolists used the faun/satyr to present the eroticism of the male Greek body. This was primarily about emphasizing male heterosexuality. However, the Symbolist interest in that body was not exclusively heterosexual. Certain Symbolists were also fascinated by the feminized male. We have already encountered this in passing in previous

chapters, but in the next we look in more detail at the figure of the androgyne in Symbolist art.

## Notes

### 1 'Vers

'Avec la laideur rustique  
De ton masque biscornu  
Où le regard raille, oblique,  
La bouche au rire fendu,

'Avec tes cornes pareilles,  
Faune, en pointes à ton front,  
Ton nez et tes deux oreilles,  
On a fait un mascaron

'Qu'on a sculpté dans un marbre  
D'un ocre veiné de sang  
Qui ressemble aux feuilles d'arbre  
De l'automne finissant.

'Mais déjà tu peux, à l'ombre  
Des pins hauts et des cyprès,  
Avant que la feuille tombe  
Des cîmes de la forêt,

'Venir boire à la fontaine  
Où ta bouche jette une eau  
Fraîche, pure, égale et saine  
A puise quand il fait chaud;

'Et tu verras dans la vasque  
Te sourire, en son reflet,  
D'un sourire vrai le masque  
De ce Faune que tu es!'

2 Fernand Khnopff, *Paganism*, c. 1910. Coloured pencil on paper, 36 × 30 cm (Private collection).

3 'Paganisme immortel es-tu mort? On le dit. Mais Pan tout bas s'en moque et la sirène en rit.'

- 4 Janis Rozentāls, *Women and the Spirits of Nature*, 1907. Cardboard, tempera, pastel, 98 × 67 cm (Latvian National Museum, Riga).
- 5 Louis Joseph Raphael Collin, *Nymph and Faun*, date unknown. Oil on canvas, 27 × 32 cm (private collection).
- 6 Arnold Böcklin, *Idyll (Pan amidst Columns)*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 62.7 × 50.2 cm (Pinakothek, Munich).
- 7 Arnold Böcklin, *Sleeping Diana Watched by two Fauns*, 1877. Oil on canvas (Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf).
- 8 Arnold Böcklin, *Spring Evening*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 67.4 × 129.5 cm (Magyar Nemzeti Museum, Budapest).
- 9 Arnold Böcklin, *Sleeping Nymph Spied On by Two Fauns*, 1884. Oil on panel, 70 × 90 cm (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam).
- 10 Gustave Moreau, *Apollo Receiving the Shepherds' Offerings (or Apollo and the Satyrs)*, c. 1885. Oil on panel, 26 × 22 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 11 Gustave Moreau, *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*, c. 1870. Watercolour, 33 × 24 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 12 Franz von Stuck, *Faun with Rhython*, 1886. Pen and ink on paper, 22.5 × 15 cm (private collection).
- 13 Franz von Stuck, *Scherzo*, 1909. Oil on wood, 78 × 84.5 cm (Civico Museo Revoltella, Trieste).
- 14 Franz von Stuck, *Faun and Water Nymph*, 1918. Oil on canvas. 156.7 × 61.5 cm (private collection). Stuck also made a statuette on the same theme: Franz von Stuck, *Faun and Water Nymph*, c. 1906. Bronze with brown-green patina, h. 53 cm (private collection).
- 15 Franz von Stuck, *Fighting Fauns*, 1889. Oil on canvas. 85.5 × 148.5 cm (Bayerische Staatsgemaldegammlungen, Munich).
- 16 Stuck exhibited the work alongside his *The Guardian of Paradise* (1889) and *Innocentia* (1889).
- 17 Franz von Stuck, *The Race*, c. 1927. Oil on canvas. 42.2 × 45.1 cm (private collection).
- 18 The subject is reminiscent of the Roman festival of the Lupercalia. Plutarch (*Life of Caesar* 61) relates how noble youths would run naked through the city, striking women with sacred animal skins to encourage fertility.
- 19 Jacek Malczewski, *The Vicious Circle*, 1895–97. Oil on canvas, 68 × 94 cm (National Museum, Poznań).
- 20 Jacek Malczewski, *Self-Portrait with Fauns: Triptych*, 1906. Oil on cardboard, each painting 40.5 × 32.5 cm (National Art Gallery, Lviv).
- 21 Jacek Malczewski, *Woman with Faun: Temptation*, 1918. Oil on board (Jacek Malczewski Museum, Radom).

- 22 Olszewski (1989: 16).
- 23 Jacek Malczewski, *Law, Fatherland, Art*, 1903. Oil on canvas, left panel (*Law*) 69.5 × 98 cm, central panel (*Fatherland*) 69.5 × 98 cm, right panel (*Art*) 69.5 × 97.5 cm (National Museum, Wrocław).
- 24 Jacek Malczewski, *The Story of a Song (Portrait of Adam Asnyk)*, 1899. Oil on canvas (National Museum, Warsaw).
- 25 Félicien Rops, *Homage to Pan*, 1886. Colour pencil and chalk on paper with gold, silver and white highlights, 30 × 25 cm (Louvre, Paris).
- 26 Félicien Rops, *Satyriasis*, undated. Soft-ground etching, 29.8 × 40 cm (private collection).
- 27 'Une femme s'approchant d'un Terme, lui passant les bras autour du cou, le regardant avec des yeux dévorants, scrutant le sourire de son affreuse gueule, une femme qui semble la soeur de celle qui bondit et s'enfourche, dans "les Sataniques" sur un ricanant Hermès.'
- 28 We might compare how Böcklin similarly gave the impression of life to his *Abandoned Venus*.
- 29 For a very different interpretation of the god Pan, we might consider Vrubel's reimagining of him after the fashion of a Slavic folk deity: Mikhail Vrubel, *Pan*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 124 × 106 cm (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). As Reeder (1976: 329) summarizes: 'Vrubel's Pan resembles not so much the erotic image of eternal youth, a hermaphroditic creature so popular in western paintings of the period, but more the leshiy, the Russian forest spirit, with a long beard, a strong mischievous figure whose head reached to the tops of the tallest trees.' See also Guerman (1996: 124, 126).
- 30 Though uncommon, the Symbolist faun could also be female; for example: Eugene Grasset, *The Little Faunesses*, 1896. Woodcut engraving, 21.1 × 14.6 cm (Cantonal and University Library, Lausanne). Published in December 1896 edition of *L'Image: Revue Artistique et Littéraire*.

## Ganymede – as Androgyne

In this chapter we consider the feminized male of Symbolist art and the role the Greek body played in articulating its femininity. We might also have placed this chapter in the first part of the book. However, the androgyne is so pervasive in Symbolist representations of the male that it is best thought of as a subset of the male Greek body's reception, rather than that of the female body. For while not exclusively so, the Symbolists were far more interested in the feminized male than the masculinized female.

The androgyne appears frequently in Symbolist literature (for example in Péladan's *The Latin Decadence*). The same is also true of Symbolist art. The ideal of the androgyne entertained by the Symbolists – one combining both masculine and feminine qualities – is not itself one based on classical literature. However, it intersects with the reception of the already-mentioned classical ideal of the god or hero as at once masculine in might, and feminine in beauty.<sup>1</sup> Of all the Symbolists, Moreau was most influenced by the androgynous type, where several of his works entertain a homoerotic ideal of the feminized male. As Lucie-Smith (2001: 68) puts it: 'The Neoplatonic idea of the androgyne was to exercise a powerful fascination over late nineteenth-century critics and aestheticians, but it was Moreau who gave form to this idea in paint on canvas'. An early example is his *Apollo and the Nine Muses*<sup>2</sup> (1856). The painting shows Moreau's continuing indebtedness to Neoclassicism at this time, in particular in the figural grouping in the background. However, the focus is clearly on the androgynous figure of the youthful god in the foreground. Moreau imagines him as an effeminate oriental prince, his long red hair crowned with a golden wreath and a jewel. He looks out at the observer, holding a small white flower in his right hand and a sheaf of corn in his left. His body is that of an adolescent of slight build, not that of a fully grown man.

This *ephebe* is repeated in seemingly endless variations in Moreau's later work. Two typical examples are his *The Raising of Ganymede*<sup>3</sup> (1886) and *Hesiod and the Muse*<sup>4</sup> (1891) (Figure 24). The first depicts this chapter's titular myth, in which Zeus in the form of an eagle bore off his beloved boy Ganymede to heaven to be his cupbearer. In the painting the great eagle appears in a blaze of light. Ganymede is shown as a nude effeminate youth facing us helplessly as he is carried away, while his dog futilely barks at the eagle. *Hesiod and the Muse* uses the same type of youth to represent the archaic Greek poet Hesiod, accompanied by a Muse. We see the nude poet in profile as he processes along ceremonially, carrying his great lyre in his hand. The Muse, a fair-haired young woman with great green wings, floats along behind him. Her hand rests on his as she guides him in strumming on his lyre. In a fantastic imaginary landscape beyond, we see a Greek temple on a mountain top, framed against a blue sky and the evening star. Moreau experimented with the theme in a number of different compositions. Both paintings celebrate a specific kind of androgynous male beauty that clearly had aesthetic appeal to the artist.

The contexts in which the androgyne appears in Symbolist art are rarely as straightforward as the examples considered so far. There is often something tormented about the way in which the androgyne is presented. This must be seen in the broader context of the Symbolists' interest in sexual angst, and how man is wracked by sexual desire. In several of his paintings, Moreau reflects this idea of personal suffering in the figure of the androgyne. His *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*<sup>5</sup> (c. 1870) and *Diomedes Being Eaten by His Horses*<sup>6</sup> (1865) both imagine the androgyne in the position of victim. The first is a rather iconic scene of a dead androgynous poet carried by a grieving centaur. The poet is a beautiful youth with long blonde hair crowned by a laurel wreath, nude save for a golden band, green drape and his jewel-encrusted gold lyre. However, despite this splendour his head lolls to one side lifelessly. The centaur could not present a more pronounced contrast. An older man with the beard of a Greek philosopher, rugged and tanned, he has paused atop a small hillock. He bows his similarly wreathed head in a gesture of mourning. Moreau sets this scene in a bizarre world of intense colours, against a sharp red sunset shot through as if with blood (we might compare his *Sirens*). Entirely of the artist's creation, this powerful image caught his contemporaries' imagination. The French author Marcel Proust (1872–1922) described the work in his *Cahier 5*.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 24** Gustave Moreau, *Hesiod and the Muse*. Courtesy Getty – Mondadori Portfolio.

Mathieu et al. (2005: 112) have spoken of how the centaur appears to bear the poet 'piously', despite its being a 'symbol of the most primitive animal'.<sup>8</sup> The choice of delicate poet – a sort of Symbolist self-imagining – and brutish man-beast maximizes the scene's dramatic contrast. As Croce (2017: 203) put it in her psychoanalytical description of the painting:

The young androgyne, bleeding from his jewels which run the length of his stomach and between his legs, as pale as the vast sky, fluid, contrasts with the brown and muscly animal . . . One might speak of a sad phallus cut off from life. Orpheus in the body of an infant-adolescent, between the two sexes, carried by the masculine centaur or relieved by his marvellous muse . . . Frail and tender, Orpheus the poet, artist, in his sweet dependence. One doubt – it seems – could break him.<sup>9</sup>

The dead poet might serve as metaphor for the pleasant estrangement of Symbolist art. That art is conceived of as having such power that it may even tame the wilder instincts – here represented by the centaur. But in this painting the androgyne is equally a tragic figure. *Diomedes Being Eaten by His Horses* presents a further variant of that tragic ideal. Moreau's subject is drawn from one of the labours of Hercules, in which the hero had to capture the man-eating horses of the King of Thrace, Diomedes.<sup>10</sup> When Hercules' companion was eaten by the horses after they captured them, Hercules fed Diomedes to his horses in punishment. Moreau's Diomedes is a blonde-haired youth with a feminine face. We see his terror at the moment he is torn limb from limb by his maddened horses, three of which crash down upon him. Sat atop an archway above, Hercules looks on placidly. The work does not appear to have been understood in its time. Moreau sent the painting to the Salon of 1866, where, as Mathieu (1994: 90) summarizes, 'the critical reception was polite, but public interest turned away somewhat from this painting running against fashion, which had mythology as its sole source of inspiration'.<sup>11</sup> However, one cannot help but wonder if contemporary observers failed to comprehend Moreau's very particular model of the androgyne hero.

The artist exhibited *Diomedes Being Eaten by His Horses* alongside his *Orpheus*<sup>12</sup> (1865). The legendary bard of Greek myth had a strong appeal for Symbolist artists. Orpheus was the son of the King of Thrace and Calliope, one of the Muses. His myth is recorded by several classical authors, notably Virgil (*Georgics* 4.453–527) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 10.1–85), whose accounts artists tended to follow, but he is referenced widely in classical literature.<sup>13</sup> The greatest musician of all time, he could easily function as symbol for the poetic inspiration of the Symbolists' own art. But the narrative of his myth also had its own attractions. His ability to charm all of nature with the power of his music – even saving the Argonauts from the Sirens by playing music more



beautiful than their song<sup>14</sup> – was inherently attractive. Yet the tragic quality of his story was perhaps still more so. This included his failed attempt to lead his dead love Eurydice back from the underworld, having not met the gods' one condition not to look back upon her, and how he was later dismembered by Dionysus' Maenads, his severed head still singing as it floated on its lyre down the river Hebrus and across the Mediterranean all the way to the island of Lesbos (where a shrine, later to become an oracle, was built).<sup>15</sup> Many Symbolists illustrated his myth, but to Moreau Orpheus provided another opportunity to depict the tragic androgyne and he returned to the theme in several works. In his *Orpheus* (Figure 25) we see a Thracian girl who has found and picked up the severed head of Orpheus, which she carries in her hand, looking down at it mournfully, apparently overcome with the beauty of its song and his tragic fate. Moreau described her as 'human hope receiving poetry, victorious over death and giving it as asylum the heart of woman'.<sup>16</sup> The musician's face set on the lyre, with its golden hair and fine features, is so beautiful as to seem that of a woman. Moreau here picks up on Orpheus' eventual fate, and the tragic quality is similar to that of the *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*. We have the same elements of the sad image of the dead poet, mourned by one who has found their corpse. Why this repeated motif of the tragic androgyne in so much of Moreau's work? It seems to connote mourning of the cutting off from life of a particular type of male beauty. This may in turn symbolize something further, perhaps the suppression of homosexuality, but this interpretation cannot be conclusively proven.<sup>17</sup>

The motif of Orpheus' floating head appealed to other Symbolists too. Redon depicted this part of the myth in his *Head of Orpheus*<sup>18</sup> (c. 1881) and *Orpheus*<sup>19</sup> (c. 1903–10). Several studies also exist on the theme (see for example Figure 26), including the charcoal drawing *Head of Orpheus*. The influence of Moreau's painting of sixteen years earlier is clear. Redon similarly depicts the head of Orpheus attached to his lyre, as if rising out of it. The drawing shows how during this time the artist experimented with various ways of representing the myth. In this case his focus is on Orpheus' face as an expression of the soul's anguish, where the vague outline of ocean waves beyond suggest the head is floating to the island of Lesbos. *Orpheus* is a later representation of the same episode from his colour period. The brightly coloured pastel drawing again shows Orpheus' head on his lyre, its eyes closed in the sleep of death. The head



**Figure 25** Gustave Moreau, *Orpheus*. Courtesy Getty – Print Collector/Contributor.

is now orange-coloured and hairless, its facial features androgynous. In a scheme typical of his colour period, Redon highlights the lyre in blue and sets the scene against a largely purple background, with the water on which Orpheus' head floats also orange. The uses of the Orpheus myth in Symbolism are varied and versatile,<sup>20</sup> but Moreau's and Redon's works demonstrate the specific appeal of its tragic qualities, and how they expressed these by creating a paradigm of the Greek body as androgyne.



**Figure 26** Odilon Redon, *The Death of Orpheus*. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, anonymous gift in memory of Clément Dorra.

Without doubt Moreau's greatest celebration of the tragic androgyne is his *The Suitors*<sup>21</sup> (1852–82), a work which takes Homeric epic as its subject. Book 22 of the *Odyssey* relates how, on his return home to Ithaca, Odysseus slew the many suitors of his wife Penelope gathered in his palace. While artistic treatments of this episode had traditionally stressed Odysseus' heroism, Moreau took a different approach. The painting presents a gargantuan mass of effeminate male nudes, tragically posed in every way imaginable. Lucie-Smith (2001: 68) succinctly summarizes the effect:

In Moreau, it is above all the male who is languid and doomed to destruction. The poets who appear often in his compositions are frail, passive creatures; in *The Suitors*, we witness the massacre of beautiful effeminates – our sympathy goes out to them, rather than to Ulysses, whose house they have invaded.

Several distinct figures stand out in this medley of death. Moreau's own commentary on this survives. To cite the Musée Gustave Moreau's analysis:

In this profusion of bodies, several figures stand out: on the right, the androgynous figure of a young man dressed in blue (inspired by a classical sculpture of the god Atys, copied at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence in 1858); in the centre, a figure of the prince-poet kneeling down and leaning on a lyre personifying Phemios, the aed (singer of epic poetry), whom Ulysses spared at the request of his son Telemachus. For Moreau: 'this figure, anxious but undeterred from his poetic dream, [personifies] the young and beautiful

Greece, mother of the arts and of ideas, who scorns death and defies fate'. On the left, two ephebes stoically await death: one on his knees embraces a doe, the other, seated, spear in hand, lifts a cup to his lips. The painter explains their presence thus: 'The classical artists often placed these calm figures into their most dramatic paintings to rest the spirit and the eyes [as they] recall the spectator to a purely plastic beauty that is all the more beautiful for being calm. These beautiful people, tyrannical with their air of inopportuneness, draw the eyes and attention undividedly and force the spirit to prefer the contemplative immobility of the human body to its action and movement.'<sup>22</sup>

Moreau's comments suggest his painting was about more than simple narrative representation of the *Odyssey*. Instead he has maximally exploited the subject's potential for the display of the tragic androgyne, beautiful as he dies, making direct reference to classical art in doing so. The sheer length of time the artist spent working on this painting testifies to its personal significance. Begun in 1852, thirty years later in 1882 he decided to enlarge it (we have seen a similar case in his *The Daughters of Thespius*). Even so, such was his obsession with perfecting it that ultimately it was never finished.

The Symbolist androgyne without doubt appears most forcefully in the work of Moreau. But the feminized male does make an appearance elsewhere, with others also interested in its potential to reinvent the Greek body. An idiosyncratic type of the androgynous youth is found repeatedly in the work of the Czech Preisler. As mentioned already, while Preisler's art draws heavily on the classics such references are more often allusive than direct. The *ephebe* features prominently in several of his paintings, including *Spring* (1900) and *Black Lake*<sup>23</sup> (1904), among many others. *Spring*, recognized in its time as the artist's most important work, takes the form of a triptych (as several of the artist's other works). Exhibited in 1900 in the third exhibition of the Czech art society, the Mánes Society,<sup>24</sup> the triptych is an allegory of youth whose meaning is not definite but whose iconography draws on that of the judgement of Paris (see discussion in Chapter 3). Its large central panel shows a handsome adolescent propped against a birch tree in the midst of a rural Bohemian landscape, in which we see a stream, trees and a thatched cottage. A peasant in his Sunday best, he has taken off his jacket and hunches over as he stares into the distance, apparently lost in a melancholic revelry. A slender young woman beside him leans against another birch tree, her lower body girt in a robe and

her upper body naked. She looks as if she has just stepped from a classical relief, statuesque and with spring flowers gathered in her robe. Two individual scenes in the side panels each feature a young woman (this time clothed) in a similar landscape. In the left panel a blonde-haired woman sits on a grassy bank looking off into the distance melancholically, her hands folded in her lap and her hair coiling as it is blown in the spring breeze. The right-hand panel shows a similarly slender woman with blonde hair, resting on the grass. All of the figures seem to exist independently of one another, as if unaware of each other's physical presence (something reflected in the triptych format). The central nude appears to be an allegory of spring, while the identity of the women in the side panels is less clear. They nonetheless share the unexplained melancholy of the young man.

What is his sadness? Preisler provides no answer, so we must draw our own inferences. With its solitary youth and three beautiful women in the countryside, the painting's iconography mirrors that of the judgement of Paris. Yet unlike representations of that theme its protagonists are not part of a single mythological narrative. Paris has forgotten his judgement. Moreover, the composition is such that the youth himself is the clear focal point, suggesting that the women are accessories to his thought, or figments of his imagination. While Spring herself is largely conventional, the languid youth's engagement with her is ambiguous. Even if she and the other women represent his thoughts, those thoughts may not be happy ones, and the women in the side panels are similarly estranged. Such ambiguity is challenging for the modern observer, but it must be contextualized within the Symbolist embrace of the beauty they saw in melancholy. Here that melancholy is the youth's realization of the ephemerality of life, beauty and the erotic, faced with the coming of spring. Yet while women make a figurative appearance in the triptych, it is above all the effete youth that Preisler chooses as vehicle to express this allegory. The triptych's originality and enigmatic quality was noted and praised by critics at the time, being recognized as a new departure in Czech painting and reflecting Preisler's increasingly symbolic and mysterious tone. It was and might be variously interpreted. But for our purposes it is interesting to find another Symbolist choosing the feminized male as a motif to express tragic beauty. Preisler's youth may be considered a cousin of Moreau's and Redon's androgyne.<sup>25</sup>

For Klinger the meeting between Christianity and paganism was a subject which lent itself to an exploration of the boundaries of the sexually acceptable. We have already mentioned in passing in Chapter 2 his *Christ in Olympus*, one of the paintings that he completed for the Villa Albers. This curious composition explores aspects of this dynamic by imagining a meeting between Jesus and the Olympian pantheon. In his large-scale painting Klinger depicts Jesus, accompanied by (clothed) female personifications of the four Christian cardinal virtues bearing a cross, as he confronts the Olympian gods in an Arcadian grove. These are shown near-universally as beautiful youths, clustered around the marble throne of the bearded Zeus, who sits – with Ganymede on his lap – apparently resigned to Jesus' coming. In a golden robe, Jesus gesticulates towards Zeus, as he receives the supplication of one nude figure who has cast himself at his feet. The other Olympians, however, are largely unperturbed by the presence of the Christian saviour. The meaning of this work is ambiguous, where neither Christ's triumph nor paganism's defeat seems assured, and where its straightforward interpretation as an allegory of Christian triumph should be resisted (even if certain of Klinger's contemporaries found this attractive).<sup>26</sup> However we read the painting, though, it is clear that the Olympian pantheon represents a world in which love is free and accepted in all its forms. Klinger uses the beautiful male nude, including Ganymede, to indicate this conviction. As Tumasonis (1993: 92) summarizes: 'In *Christ on Olympus*, Klinger suggested that he believed that the classical past had been a time, not just of erotic freedom but a time when life was celebrated with a joyous sensuality, a sensuality destroyed by the prohibitions of Christianity'. Klinger's painting demonstrates that in conveying that sensuality, the Symbolists were just as able to turn to male sexual beauty as to female.

In this chapter we have seen how a certain, often tragically articulated, type of feminized male beauty had a strong appeal to the Symbolists. Despite this figure's persistent androgyny, which was frequently based on a classical archetype, it was really a subset of the Symbolist reception of the male Greek body. However, this interest in what was neither wholly male nor wholly female belies the Symbolist fascination with what we might loosely term the sexual 'other'. The androgyne was not the only incarnation of that sexual other that interested them. In the last brief section of this book we therefore consider how the Symbolists used the Greek body to express their fascination with that other.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The hermaphrodite, who unlike the androgyne specifically had both female and male genitalia, is also widely attested in ancient sculpture itself, usually in the form of Hermes and Aphrodite's child Hermaphroditos.
- 2 Gustave Moreau, *Apollo and the Nine Muses*, 1856. Oil on canvas, 103 × 83 cm (private collection).
- 3 Gustave Moreau, *The Raising of Ganymede*, 1886. Watercolour, pastel and gouache. 59 × 46 cm (private collection).
- 4 Gustave Moreau, *Hesiod and the Muse*, 1891. Oil on wood. 59 × 34.5 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 5 Gustave Moreau, *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*, c. 1870. Watercolour, 33 × 24 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 6 Gustave Moreau, *Diomedes Being Eaten by His Horses*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 138.5 × 84.5 cm (Musée des Beaux Arts, Rouen).
- 7 Indirect references to Moreau are frequent in Proust, who also wrote an essay on the artist. See McDonald and Proulx (2015: unpaginated): 'In an oblique commentary on Moreau's work, Proust performs a transfer from an early description of an unnamed but identifiable watercolour (*Poète mort porté par un centaure*, in *Cahier 5*) to a similar description of an early Elstir watercolour with a mythological subject.' Elstir is a painter in the novel, a fictional representative of Whistler. Proust visited Moreau's house in November 1898 as it was being converted to a museum following his death. See further Johnson (1978).
- 8 'Dans cette aquarelle aux coloris somptueux, le peintre a repris le theme du *poete mort* pieusement recueilli par un *centaure*, symbole pourtant de l'animaille la plus primitive.'
- 9 'Le jeune androgyne, sanglant de ses bijoux qui coulent le long de son ventre et entre ses jambes, aussi pâle que le ciel vaste, fluide, fait contraste avec l'animal brun et musclé . . . On dirait un triste phallus coupé de sa vie. Orphée au corps d'enfant-adolescent, entre deux sexes, porté par le mâle centaure ou soulagé par sa merveilleuse muse, belle comme un idéal . . . Frêle et tendre, Orphée poète, artiste, traîne sa douce dépendance. Un doute, semble-t-il, pourrait le briser.'
- 10 A separate Diomedes from that of Homeric epic.
- 11 'L'accueil de la critique fut poli, mais l'intérêt du public se détournait un peu de cette peinture à contre-courant ayant comme unique source d'inspiration la mythologie.'
- 12 Gustave Moreau, *Orpheus*, 1865. Oil on wood. 155 × 99.5 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 13 Partly on account of his veneration in ancient cult.
- 14 Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 4.



- 15 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.1–66.
- 16 Laran and Deshairs (1913: 35): ‘c’est l’espérance humaine recevant la poésie victorieuse de la mort et lui donnant comme asile le cœur de la femme’.
- 17 Interpretations of these works have been varied and imaginative. See for example Nezhinskaia and Cibelli (2016: 119–20), who compare the work to Moreau’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, finding rather in the dead Orpheus an ‘amputated form as a relic – or trophy ... at the mercy of woman’.
- 18 Odilon Redon, *Head of Orpheus*, c. 1881. Charcoal on coloured paper. 44.5 × 53.7 cm (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).
- 19 Odilon Redon, *Orpheus*, c. 1903–10. Pastel, 68.8 × 56.8 cm (Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland).
- 20 Other Symbolists reinvented Orpheus in different ways. Malczewski used the Orpheus-Eurydice myth in an allegory of First World War Poland: Jacek Malczewski, *Polonia II*, 1914. Oil on cardboard, 145 × 98.5 cm (private collection).
- 21 Gustave Moreau, *The Suitors*, 1852–82. Oil on canvas. 385 × 343 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 22 <http://en.musee-moreau.fr/object/suitors-les-pretendants> (accessed 17 May 2019).
- 23 Jan Preisler, *Black Lake*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 111 × 153 cm (National Gallery, Prague).
- 24 Named after the Czech artist Josef Mánes (1820–71).
- 25 Preisler also used the feminized male in his *Black Lake*, a painting of a nude *ephebe* accompanied by a white horse beside a dark lake. In Preisler’s work this recurrent motif appears to embody similar notions of melancholy and the tragic isolation of the soul. See further Dušková, Morganová and Ševčík (2001: 152).
- 26 Tumasonis (1993: 83) finds the painting’s source in Nietzsche: ‘Klinger intended to create an allegory of Nietzschean thought, as he interpreted it, in *Christ on Olympus* ... The artist chose as his subject the *Götterdämmerung*, or twilight of the gods. Unlike Wagner, however, he chose to represent this motif in terms of classical rather than Nordic mythology.’
- 27 We have not considered female homosexuality in this chapter, given its lesser prominence in Symbolism, but this is not to imply its absence. Rops depicted female homosexuality explicitly in a satire based around an imagined archaeological find: Félicien Rops, *Sappho: A Bas-Relief Found at Herculaneum*, undated (Félicien Rops Provincial Museum, Namur). See Albert, Erber and Peniston (2016: 16): ‘The contemporary interest in her [Sappho’s] poetry should not overshadow the fact that Sappho was stigmatized by many fin-de-siècle writers and categorized as sexually perverse, especially by illustrators who associated her with the notoriously promiscuous Messalina ... it was Félicien Rops, more than



anyone else, who captured the Decadent modernity of the sapphic myth at the end of the nineteenth century, while anticipating, even mocking, the archaeological fever around it. An undated erotic engraving with the title *Sapho: Basrelief trouvé à Herculanum/Sappho: A Bas-Relief Found at Herculaneum* crudely demonstrated the reenvisioning of the poet. Stripped of her individuality and unrecognizable, Sappho is merely one half of an unnamed Sapphic couple, nothing more than a fornicating body without a face. The only remaining vestige of the poetic figure is the symbol of the lyre, drawn to resemble a gigantic, obscene vulva, presiding over the couple's embrace.<sup>7</sup>



## Part Three

# The Other



## Animals, Monsters, Orientals – as Sexual Other

The majority of this book has looked at the Symbolists' erotic reception of the Greek body as female or as male. But their interest in the Greek body did not end there. For they were also interested in the body incarnated as what we might term the sexual 'other'. In this final chapter, we briefly overview transformations of the Greek body as that other, by way of rounding off its reception. The sexual other could take a great variety of forms. The examples we look at here, the body as animal – or part-animal – as monster and as oriental, are not intended to be exhaustive, but have been chosen to illustrate that variety by presenting a selection of the most prominent classically inspired sexual others in Symbolism.

The Symbolists had a broad interest in the animal and part-human creatures of Greek mythology, using them as metaphors for human sexuality. We have already encountered the centaur, the half-man half-horse of Greek myth, in Moreau's *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*. As well as the centaur, we might cite the various imaginings of the sphinx we have already encountered in earlier chapters. Sometimes the interest was purely in animals themselves as a proxy, or symbol, for sexuality, where the classical mythological narratives in which they feature are used to varying degrees. In other cases specific reference is made to half-human creatures. The centaur nonetheless enjoys a particular prominence in Symbolism, looming large in the work of several artists, including Böcklin, Moreau, Redon, Stuck and Klinger. Although the example we have seen in Moreau rather reflects its more noble qualities in Greek myth, the centaur was more often used as a symbol of man's bestial nature – where this is in turn a signifier for sexual instinct.

Böcklin's *Battle of the Centaurs*<sup>1</sup> (1873) provides an early Symbolist conception of the theme. The painting, admired by Nietzsche for how it conceptualizes the brute force of human nature, depicts a chaotic tumble of

centaurs battling with one another. Two centaurs grapple in the centre of the composition, while to the left another hauls up a mighty rock and prepares to cast it down upon his foes. On the right is a mass of entangled horse legs and torsos, where two fallen centaurs continue to wrestle with one another on the ground.<sup>2</sup> The subject of Böcklin's painting is not the erotic, but it clearly demonstrates how the centaur could be used as an allegory for frenzy. Later Symbolists frequently transposed this association into erotic contexts. One example is Redon's *Struggle between a Woman and a Centaur*<sup>3</sup> (1905). Redon's colour pastel drawing shows the figure of a brown centaur and a female nude as they wrestle, their arms interlocked, set within a bright blue and yellow Arcadia of his imagination. Only the woman's back is visible, her face pressed against the centaur's chest. Though physically the stronger, the centaur has nonetheless fallen back on his hind legs as he tries to stabilize himself. It is not clear who the victor in this struggle will be, as woman and centaur's overall powers seem equally balanced. Their combat seems to represent the eternal sexual struggle of man and woman.<sup>4</sup>

In his paintings *The Fantastic Hunt*<sup>5</sup> (1890) and *The Lusty Ride*<sup>6</sup> (1900), Stuck also explored the centaur's symbolic potential for representing human instincts, including sexuality. The theme of the first is similar to that of Böcklin's *Battle of the Centaurs*. One centaur, bow in hand, hunts another centaur who flees before him. The latter has just been pierced by one of his pursuer's arrows, and rears up in agony. In a curious adaptation of the centaur's conventional iconography, Stuck gives him the antlers of a stag. The whole scene takes place in an Arcadian woodland, but beyond this we are given no specific context or narrative for this strange drama. Klinger's earlier *Pursued Centaur*<sup>7</sup> (1881), one of his cycle of drawings *Intermezzi*, Opus IV<sup>8</sup> – a series of amusing themes on imaginary subjects – is analogous in this respect. A series of human riders in sporting apparel hunt a terrified centaur through a field of corn. As Redon, Klinger combines humans and centaurs in a single composition (as in ancient art),<sup>9</sup> but he also uniquely blends modern and ancient iconography. As ever with Klinger's illustrations the exact meaning is elusive, but the centaur is again associated with the wilder aspects of human nature. Meanwhile the *Lusty Ride* uses the centaur in a directly erotic allegory. It depicts a brown-hided centaur in profile bounding forth madly, his neck and hands stretched out before him frenziedly as if out of control. On his back he bears a nude redhead, the pale

flesh of whose limbs contrasts with his dark hide. An expression of abandon on her face, one arm flailing out behind her as she grips his mane with the other, her red cloak flies out in the wind as they hurtle along. Again we have no specific mythological context, but it is clear that the image is a metaphor of sexual abandon.

In contrast to such imagery, we have seen how Moreau presented the centaur in a completely different light. In doing so he draws on another Greek mythological tradition, which found nobility in the centaur. This largely related to the Homeric figure of Chiron, a wise old centaur who educated the young Achilles, as well as other Greek gods and heroes including Dionysus, the god of healing Asclepius and Jason (of the Argonauts).<sup>10</sup> The artist treated the theme directly in his *The Education of Achilles*<sup>11</sup> (or *The Centaur*) (1884). Chiron, whose human torso is here that of a handsome young man wearing a laurel wreath, bears the blonde child Achilles on his back. The centaur strums on a lyre as he turns back to Achilles, who reaches out towards him happily. Chiron is instructing Achilles in the art of music (and poetry). We see the pair beside a dark pool in a verdant gorge, beyond which Mount Pelion rises.<sup>12</sup> The myth of Chiron had been popular with earlier French Neoclassical artists, including Delacroix, and was also depicted by Rodin. As Lacambre et al. (1999: 36) have argued, Moreau's centaur paintings 'convey the epic battle between the body's basest passions and the soul's loftiest aspirations'. The emphasis of *The Education of Achilles* is evidently the latter. While the majority of Symbolist art may be more interested in the former, it is an indicator of the movement's deep indebtedness to classical literature that the centaur's other tradition is also represented.<sup>13</sup>

Many other animals were used to represent (principally male) sexuality in Symbolism. Greek myth provided a wealth of motifs here, whose interpretation we cannot cover exhaustively. To take two recurrent examples we might consider the bull and the swan, both of which involve transformations of Zeus into an animal in pursuit of love. Several Symbolists depicted the bull in representing the myth of the rape of Europa (see also below on the Minotaur myth). Zeus, enamoured of the beautiful maiden Europa, took the form of a handsome bull to carry her off across the sea.<sup>14</sup> Moreau illustrated the myth several times in the 1860s, including in his *Jupiter and Europa*<sup>15</sup> (1868), *Europa and the Bull*<sup>16</sup> (c. 1869) and *The Rape of Europa*<sup>17</sup> (1869). All show the moment

of Europa's abduction by Zeus, varying the exact setting. In the first oil painting she is a blonde nude lifted magically from the ground onto the bull's back as the latter takes flight. Zeus has the body of a white bull but the face of a god, framed by a halo. He looks up at Europa, who looks back down at him in turn, apparently unperturbed. The second, a watercolour, varies the same composition, with Zeus now wholly bull, although he retains his halo as an indication of his divinity. In the final oil painting, Moreau transposes a similar figural grouping to an entirely different context, a larger twilit landscape typical of the Mantegna-inspired imagery frequent in his work. In this version Europa is more surprised by her sudden kidnap. Moreau treats his subject in a consistently elegant fashion, but the clear implication in all versions is that the bull represents the lust of the god for the fair young woman.

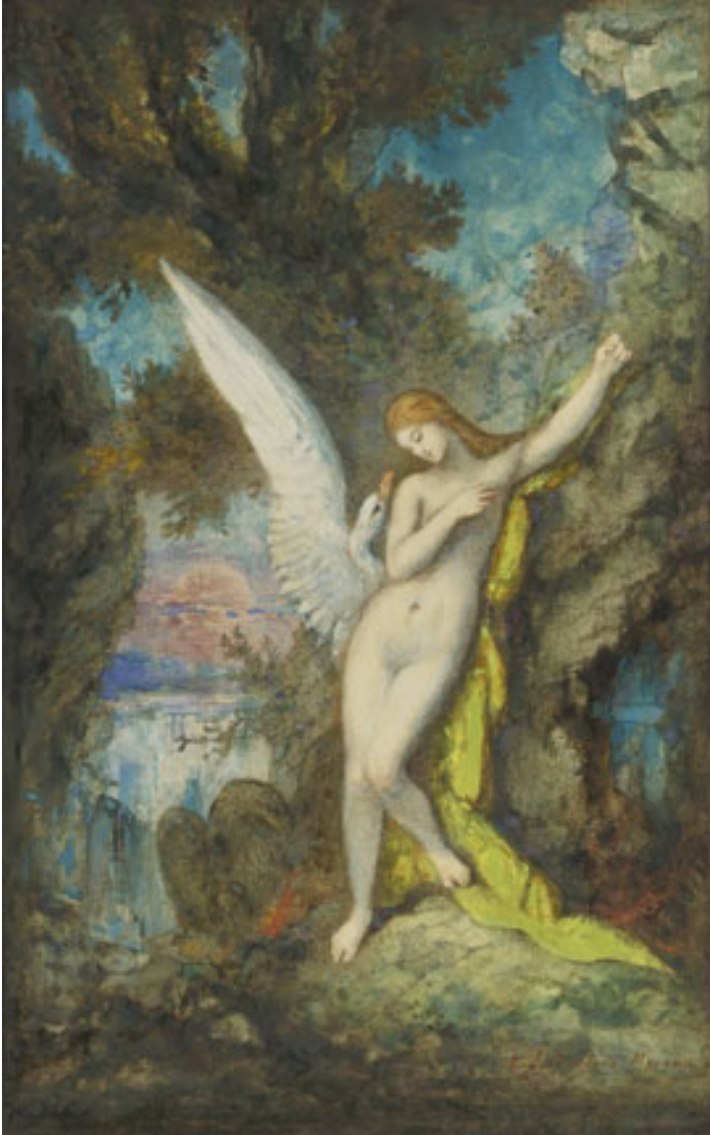
A contemporary of the artist criticized Europa's appearance in these works as that of 'a pale lifeless statue, less Greek than Roman'.<sup>18</sup> The criticism is interesting for what it reveals about contemporary ideas of the stylistic differences between periods of ancient sculpture, where (following Winckelmann) Greek sculpture was evidently considered to have an authenticity, virtuosity or expressiveness that later Roman works lacked, being thought of as largely derivative or consisting of imitations of poorer quality. For Europa to be a true representative of the heroine of Greek myth, she must consequently have the genuine qualities of a Greek sculpture. The specific implication here seems to be of a classical Greek sculpture of the later period, such as we have encountered throughout this book. But we should not be too quick to assume this was universally the case for the Symbolists, even if it often was, for there were exceptions. Among other Symbolists interested in Europa's myth was the Russian Serov. He depicted it in his *The Rape of Europa*<sup>19</sup> (1910), in which he turned rather to archaic Greek sculpture for inspiration. We now see the couple midway in their journey across the ocean, with Serov showing the bull swimming through the deep blue sea rather than flying over it. On his brown back he carries the figure of Europa, who wears a short black tunic. She looks down nervously at the sea as she seeks to steady herself, kneeling on the bull's back and gripping one of his horns. Serov makes a direct reference to archaic Greek art by modelling her stylized face and hair on a Demeter *koure*<sup>20</sup> (a female form of the male shown in Figure 19). In doing so the artist clearly wants his Europa to appear as authentically 'Greek' as possible, which as mentioned above is a broader



characteristic of contemporary Russian Symbolism. What is interesting for our purposes is that this reference to archaic, rather than classical, sculpture is very deliberate. It is something we are expected to notice, and on the basis of which to infer that Serov's depiction of a Greek myth is as a result more genuine. It is also a statement about his departure from Neoclassicism, which the artist is bypassing to reach back to the heart of the ancient myth.

The swan was also used by several Symbolists to represent man's sexuality, where Greek myth – above all that of Leda and the swan – plays an important role. In a similar tale to that of Europa, Zeus takes the form of a swan to woo the beautiful Leda, wife of the King of Sparta Tyndarus.<sup>21</sup> The theme had been popular in art since the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Correggio, Rubens and others all having depicted the myth. In his *Leda*<sup>22</sup> (date unknown) (Figure 27), Moreau remains within this tradition by portraying his heroine as a beautiful nude fawned upon by a swan, but where the eroticism of the myth is otherwise implicit. Later Symbolists and Art Nouveau artists (including Klimt<sup>23</sup>) also took an interest in the theme, occasionally taking a more direct approach to representing its erotic element. These included Preisler in his *Leda and the Swan*<sup>24</sup> (1909). Leda lies on the banks of a stream under a tree in flower, locked in an embrace with a large swan, one of her legs wrapped around its great white wing. Preisler's interpretation of the myth is far more literal than that of Moreau, as the painting shows Leda actually mating with the swan (with somewhat ridiculous results). But the subject appears to have captured the artist's imagination, and we find him returning to it again in another oil painting of 1913–14. In these works, Leda's naked body is the sexually desired object, while the bird represents sexual desire. The swan is a powerful bird, and in the oil painting it seems to have physically overpowered Leda. It is another example of the transformation in Symbolism of Greek myth as metaphor for the overpowering and irrational nature of human sexuality. But it also shows the facility of the movement's artists in bringing animal symbolism to bear in such allegories.

Animals of the natural world were not alone in playing a role in such Symbolist metaphors. Their unnatural counterparts, monsters, also populated classical myth, literature and art, presenting artists with a further incarnation of the sexual other. The centaur, as we have seen, was an ambiguous beast and could be interpreted as both malign and benign, depending on the context. But



**Figure 27** Gustave Moreau, *Leda*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

some of the half-human figures of classical myth were more purely symbols of terror. Despite this, the Symbolists were able to find metaphors for the erotic in such monsters. The concept of erotic love that was in some way unnatural had a specific fascination for them, given the opportunities it afforded for exploring the deeper – and frequently less acceptable – recesses of unconscious human

sexuality. The cyclops, the dreadful one-eyed giant of Greek myth, was a key figure here. Above all Polyphemus – and his unrequited love for the beautiful nymph Galatea<sup>25</sup> – caught their imagination. Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 13.750–897) tells of the cyclops' jealousy of Galatea's love for the handsome shepherd Acis. Both Moreau and Redon returned repeatedly to Polyphemus' myth in their art, using it as a metaphor for sexual voyeurism. Moreau's *Galatea*<sup>26</sup> (c. 1880), exhibited in the Salon of that year, is focused on the figure of the nymph, who appears as a blonde nude. In a composition similar to that of his *Leda*, Galatea has taken refuge in a cave full of magical crystals and corals, too small for the cyclops to enter into. To the upper right we see his brooding face at the mouth of the cave, lent on his hand as he mournfully contemplates the fair form of the nymph. Moreau later returned to the myth in a similar composition in his *Galatea*<sup>27</sup> (1896) (Figure 28). Here he again focuses on the nude form of the nymph in the foreground, on whom Polyphemus is fixated, this time situating the scene in a sea grotto where Galatea has taken refuge. The cyclops himself now appears more as if he were a sea Triton, with algae and sea shells in his hair. In both versions the artist dispenses with convention by depicting him with an otherwise normal human face, his cyclopean eye an additional third set on his forehead.

Moreau was fascinated by the myth. He had photographs of the Italian Renaissance artists Raphael's (1483–1520) and Sebastiano del Piombo's (1485–1547) renditions of it hanging in his dining room. The 1880 Salon was the last in which the artist exhibited, and the powerfully psychological treatment of the myth he sent on that occasion was a great success. Its great impact on other artists is clear principally from Redon's own version of the myth, *The Cyclops*<sup>28</sup> (1898) (Figure 29). In the painting we see the radiant nude form of the young Galatea upon an opalescent hillside. In the background, his great head emerging above the mountain peaks and his giant baleful eye staring out mournfully, is Polyphemus. In many ways, given its terrifying portrayal of the cyclops, Redon's treatment of the theme is far more disturbing than that of Moreau. Redon effectively makes explicit the sexual voyeurism inherent in the myth, which Moreau had only hinted at more subtly. In shifting the emphasis from Galatea to Polyphemus Redon betrays the Symbolist interest in the potential of the cyclops as an allegory for the brutality of man's sexual nature. The contrast between Polyphemus' sheer monstrous power and the delicate



**Figure 28.** Gustave Moreau, *Galatea*. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.





**Figure 29** Odilon Redon, *The Cyclops*. Courtesy Getty – Fine Art/Contributor.

beauty of the nymph emphasizes the sheer unnaturalness of such erotic love. Presented with such a forceful contrast, we cannot help but feel that Redon is seeking recognition in his observer of the essentially bestial and furious nature of sexuality.

The Symbolists found other metaphors for such forms of unnatural love in Greek myth. Perhaps one of the most bizarre was that of Pasiphae and the bull,

the creation myth for the half-bull half-man monster the Minotaur, whom the hero Theseus would later slay in its labyrinth. Pasiphae had fallen in love with a beautiful bull, and had implored the inventor Daedalus – who took pity on her – to create a contraption allowing her to mate with it. With its suggestion of the monstrous fruit of this unnatural union, Pasiphae's myth also allowed the Symbolists to explore more perverse sexual longings. It was a theme that Moreau returned to repeatedly in several studies and finished paintings, now in the Musée Gustave Moreau. In one example of a finished work, his *Pasiphaë*<sup>29</sup> (1880–90), we see Pasiphae, a beautiful young woman, beholding the handsome white bull in a landscape. Behind her is the bull contraption that Daedalus has invented for her, beside which the inventor sits with his head in his hands, evidently remorseful for what he has done. Pasiphae's face is, however, animated and determined. It is a strange image for a strange myth, and in several other works of the same title Moreau explores its perverse nature from several different angles.<sup>30</sup> In all of them, it is above all the unnatural nature and inevitability of Pasiphae's love that is emphasized.

Another monster from classical myth frequently depicted by the Symbolists was the Chimera. According to Hesiod, this was a triple-headed monster, the daughter of the monsters Echidna and Typhon (the sphinx and Hydra were among the Chimera's sisters). In the *Iliad* Homer described the Chimera as a hybrid, being part lion in front and goat in her middle, with the tail of a serpent. The monster was ultimately slain by the hero Bellerophon. The Chimera had been interpreted with great variation since the Renaissance, taking as many different incarnations as artists' imaginations allowed. In Symbolism her exact appearance also varies widely, but several artists took a new approach to representing the creature, including at times moving away from emphasizing her monstrous nature. In his *The Chimera*<sup>31</sup> (1867) (Figure 30), Moreau even changed the gender of the creature, giving it the form of an effeminate male. A sort of beautiful centaur with blue wings, his upper torso that of a fair-haired youth, he bounds off the edge of a cliff about to take flight into the sky. A golden-haired female nude has cast herself about his neck in an expression of abandon, her arms clinging to him as she kisses his cheek, one of her feet already off the ground and the other on the tips of her toes as she too leaps from the edge of the cliff. The painting is a curious reinterpretation of the myth, a sympathetic portrayal of the Chimera which makes it a symbol for



**Figure 30** Gustave Moreau, *The Chimera*. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.

beauty and longing. In his *The Chimaera's Despair*<sup>32</sup> (c. 1892), the French Symbolist painter and illustrator Alexandre Séon (1855–1917) took a similar approach. In a canvas clearly inspired by Moreau and his sphinx paintings, Séon paints the Chimera with the upper body of a beautiful young woman and the main trunk of a lion, with great blue and golden wings. She sits on a lonely rock beside an ocean cave, the sun setting on the sea behind her, and

appears to cry out in despair. Rather than conveying horror, the monster again emphasizes longing and isolation. It is symptomatic of the Symbolists' shift in focus in interpreting Greek myth that even monsters such as the Chimera have now come primarily to function as allegories of sexuality.

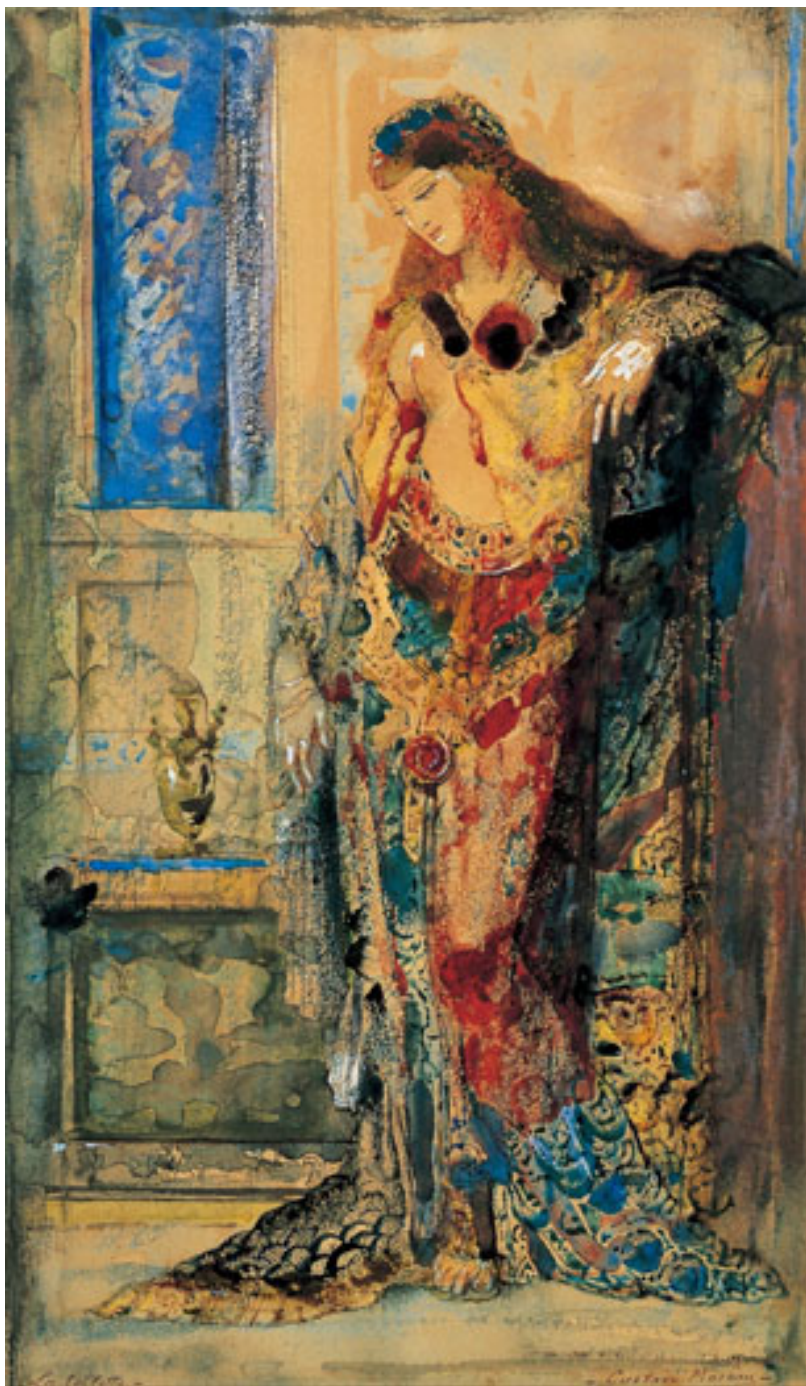
One final, but important, sexual other in Symbolism is the oriental.<sup>33</sup> Most often conceived of as female, she is a much broader feature of Symbolist art whose reception extends beyond the classics. For this reason it would not be correct to speak of the oriental body as only 'Greek' in Symbolist art, where it is more often loosely conceived in terms of ancient Egyptian, Persian or East Asian culture, and we do not therefore consider her in detail in this study. But the oriental woman was occasionally conceived of in classical – or part-classical – terms. In Symbolism we might speak broadly of the 'oriental' woman as the 'unattainable' woman, where her distance from the everyday world and her mysticism either represent a sort of ideal woman that may not exist in the real world, or connote a femininity that is impossible to obtain for some other reason. As such, she too is a sexual other. The type of Moreau's *Salome* (see Chapter 2) recurs again and again in many artists' work, and she is undoubtedly the most basic symbol in Symbolism of the dangerous oriental woman. Yet while there are a few particularly emblematic incarnations in which we encounter her, the oriental is interpreted expansively by the Symbolists and is to be found in contexts endlessly varied. At times taking the form of a specific historical or mythological personality, and at others something less defined, what unites her depiction in Symbolism is an emphasis on a refined or dangerous sexuality that makes her inaccessible. She was sometimes refracted through classical proxies, where the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and Flaubert's Salammbo had a particular appeal, among other figures drawn from classical history and myth.

Moreau's *The Toilet*<sup>34</sup> (c. 1885–90) (Figure 31) is a good summary of the basic imagery of the oriental woman in Symbolism.<sup>35</sup> The painting, which does not illustrate any particular narrative or context, simply shows an imagined oriental woman preparing to wash. She wears an elaborately patterned shawl and dress, a palette of red, green and gold. The painting demonstrates all the typical decorative opulence of Moreau's painting, and his penchant for richly hued costume. But the iconography of the image is somewhat confused, showing an (again androgynous) woman of European appearance, with



East Asian facial features, wearing a costume that appears more Persian or Indian in appearance, standing beside a Greek vase. While Moreau's flight of fantasy here is particularly idiosyncratic of his style, such indefinite iconography is nonetheless typical of the Symbolists more broadly. Similar imagery also occurs frequently in the works of the French Symbolist Gaston Bussière (1862–1928). Bussière was greatly inspired by drama and opera, and many of the figures he represents have strongly tragic associations, and are frequently framed in orientalizing terms. As the *Musées Bourgoigne* (2017: 2) put it: 'Over the years, his world became increasingly focused in integrating an orientalist dimension charged with eroticism and nourished by the writers Schulz and Flaubert as well as contemporary archaeological discoveries'. His *Helen of Troy*<sup>36</sup> (1895) translates the idea of the oriental woman to the context of Greek myth. Exhibited in the 1895 Paris Salon, the painting shows the woman who caused the downfall of Troy simply as a young oriental princess. She sits in a garden decked out in Byzantine jewellery with her flowing red hair elaborately dressed. This is essentially a new conception of Helen of Troy which has lost interest in her narrative and abstracts her as an oriental. Moreau's slightly later painting on the same theme, *The Glorification of Helen*<sup>37</sup> (1897), takes this dynamic still further. In this work Helen appears as a sort of deified nude idol, with a golden crown and halo, holding a white lotus flower and surrounded by various attributes. This is a far cry from the depictions of Helen of earlier art, where all trace of her mythological narrative has now disappeared. As Moog-Grünwald (2014: 316) described her: 'Helen here appears as another Maria, who transcends matter'.<sup>38</sup>

The Symbolists' interest in Helen also belies their strong association between the oriental and the tragic. This is a subset of their broader interest in the beautiful but tragic woman. After Salome there was probably no ancient figure that so perfectly summarized such qualities for the Symbolists and their contemporaries as Cleopatra. The legendary beauty of the historical Egyptian queen and successive lover of the Roman generals Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, the fateful role she played at a turning point in Roman history and her tragic death at her own hands (through the self-inflicted bite of an asp) had a strong aesthetic pull for the Symbolists. As well as the dramatic and tragic qualities she embodied, Cleopatra was also interesting for her simple potential as a sexually alluring and dangerous oriental woman. Her representation on



**Figure 31** Gustave Moreau, *The Toilet*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

the stage by the French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), who more generally exercised a strong influence on the imagination of *fin-de-siècle* art, contributed significantly to Cleopatra's popularity with artists. As Bronfen (2015: 241) argues:

Not only is her performance of Cleopatra as a re-figuration of Venus documented by a plethora of photographs taken of her while she was enacting this role for diverse theater productions. Bernhardt also had Alfons Mucha and Georges Fouquet devise a snake bracelet for this particular role, while both Gustave Moreau and Georges Antoine Rochegrosse painted her as Cleopatra.

The Egyptian queen was depicted by both Böcklin, in his *The Death of Cleopatra*<sup>39</sup> (1872), and by Moreau, in his *Cleopatra*<sup>40</sup> (1887) (Figure 32), among several others. As Lindemann and Schmidt (2001: 226) argue, Böcklin may have been inspired by the wave of Egyptian orientalism unleashed by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, or Giuseppe Verdi's (1813–1901) 1871 opera *Aida*. With the characteristically tragic relish of a Symbolist, Böcklin focuses on the moment of Cleopatra's demise, her half-clothed figure emerging from the shadows as she presses the asp against her naked breast.<sup>41</sup> In contrast Moreau's depiction of the queen is far more symbolic in nature. We see her as a beautiful young woman sat on her throne, surrounded by various oriental trappings in whose baroque detail Moreau has clearly revelled. She looks out to sea, where ships are gathered, and we can also see an Egyptian obelisk and other monuments in the background. Böcklin's and Moreau's interpretations of Cleopatra demonstrate the dual fascination of her tragedy and her opulence.

An analogous but fictitious figure for the Symbolists was Salammbo. Following the publication of Flaubert's novel *Salammbo* in 1862, Salome acquired a classical counterpart in the novel's heroine. Flaubert claimed that this 'historical' novel about ancient Carthage, replete with an ostensibly academic level of attention to detail, was based on extensive studies. Much of the detail in fact appears to have been created by the author. Nonetheless, the figure of the eponymous heroine captured the imaginations of many Symbolist artists. She can really be considered a refracted reception of the figures of both Salome and Cleopatra, with both of whom she had much in common: a beautiful oriental seductress whose tragic story unfolds in an opulent court in



**Figure 32** Gustave Moreau, *Cleopatra*. Courtesy Getty – DEA Picture Library/Contributor.



the ancient Near East. To summarize the plot briefly: Salamambo is the beautiful priestess daughter of Hamilcar Barca, the great but exiled Carthaginian general. Carthage is threatened because a group of unpaid veterans have rebelled under the leadership of the soldier Matho. Hamilcar is summoned to return to wage war on the rebels and save Carthage, but with the help of the cunning slave Spendius, Matho secretly enters Carthage and steals the sacred veil and palladium of Carthage, the 'Zaimph', prompting Salamambo to enter the rebel camp clandestinely to steal it back. Matho has fallen in love with Salamambo but despite a heroic struggle against Hamilcar he is ultimately defeated. During his ritual sacrifice it is implied that Salamambo has fallen in love with him too, and in the final tragic denouement of the book she commits suicide by drinking poison.

Typical of the high melodrama popular at the *fin-de-siècle*, Flaubert's novel found some belated success. However, despite his attempt to clothe his historical novel in apparently well-researched detail, it was ultimately only the beautiful and tragic figure of Salamambo herself that garnered any real interest – 'clothe' being the operative word here, with Flaubert's opulent detail of costume and jewellery firing the imagination of contemporary artists. To quote the description of the heroine at Matho's sacrifice:

From ankles to hips she was sheathed in a net of narrow mesh imitating a fish's scales, and gleaming like mother of pearl; a solid blue band round her waist showed her breasts through two crescent-shaped scallops; carbuncle pendants hid their tips. Her headdress was composed of peacock feathers starred with jewels; a wide cloak, white as snow, fell back behind her, and with her elbows in, her knees tightly together, with diamond bracelets at the top of her arms, she sat straight, in a hieratic attitude.<sup>42</sup>

There are a number of aesthetic elements here dear to artists of the time and which reflect their ideal of the eroticized oriental: the scantily clad female, the peacock feather, unusual and opulent combinations of colours, and ornate jewellery. Cleopatra had long fascinated artists for the same reasons, with Salamambo's reception really one dimension of her own. For she has many attributes in common with the Egyptian queen: an erotic beauty akin to that of a classical sculpture; royal (or near-royal in Salamambo's case) status; a proliferation of oriental trappings; the prominent presence of a snake in her

story; a touch of stubbornness, violence and even cruelty (partly reflected in her family); at times almost supernatural – occasionally given literal emphasis – power over men enabling her to render the virtue of a Roman-type military hero worthless; her involvement at a cataclysmic moment for a great civilization; and her eventual suicide. As Cleopatra, Salammbo is also a *femme fatale*, with a destructive power inherent to her nature.

Artistic receptions of both Cleopatra and Salammbo (and Salome) draw upon a conventional repertoire of the sexualized and dangerous oriental body. As for her Biblical and Egyptian counterparts, there is nevertheless great variety in her representation. Many minor Symbolists depicted her, and we cannot consider her full reception here. However, one consistent theme is artists' characterization (true to Flaubert) of Salammbo as a sexually alluring female who is nonetheless – by virtue of her sacral role – inaccessible. As such, she becomes a sexual other. Three works demonstrating this are Carl Strathmann's (1866–1939) *Salammbo*<sup>43</sup> (1894–95), František Kobliha's (1877–1962) *Salambo*<sup>44</sup> (1913) and Bussière's *Salammbo*<sup>45</sup> (1920). Strathmann's version focuses on the great black snake that features in Flaubert's narrative as a sacred symbol of Carthage, residing in Salammbo's quarters as a sort of animal familiar. The artist makes the snake itself as prominent as Salammbo, its heavy black form coiling around her as if constricting her as she lies on her couch. The image is almost demonic in quality, something enhanced by the strange thorny flowers (cf. Redon) surrounding the pair and the work's black and ochre tones. It is an ominous, almost frightening portrayal of Flaubert's heroine, and one clearly intended to be reminiscent of Biblical imagery of Eve and of sin. As a result Strathmann's *Salammbo* is almost iconographic, where Flaubert's heroine as the beautiful young woman has come to symbolize evil, connoted by the snake.

In strong contrast, Kobliha's *Salambo* is a much simpler work. Far less hieratic in quality, its focus is instead on Salammbo's pale nude figure and long black hair, with the snake no longer dominant but coiling at her feet. In this respect it is a far more conventional representation, and the composition is similar to that found in many other Symbolists' depictions of the same subject. Yet Salammbo remains somehow inaccessible, despite her allure, as if she did not belong to the realm of mortals. In complete contrast again, in his *Salammbo* Bussière imagines her as a sort of young Byzantine princess, using similar iconography to that of his *Helen of Troy* (see above). In this chronologically

latest of the three depictions, she is now a pretty red-headed girl with blue eyes, rather elegantly dressed, who looks out at us with innocent curiosity. This is clearly a departure from the far more sexually charged image of her that earlier Symbolists entertained. Yet despite the difference between Bussière's, Koblíha's and Strathmann's representations of Salammbo, all have in common an almost voyeuristic interest in the beautiful priestess who haunted the inner sanctum of the Carthaginian citadel, whether or not that interest is ostensibly erotic. In this respect they share the spirit of Flaubert's text and show how the ideal of the tragic oriental beauty continued to preoccupy the minds of artists throughout the period we are looking at. What ultimately unites these Symbolist depictions of Salammbo is her otherness. While she may be an object of fascination, her tragedy and orientalism make her irremediably alien.

In this chapter we have encountered some of the many ways in which the Symbolists framed the sexual other, and the classical reference points they used in doing so. As we have seen in our examination of the androgyne in Chapter 8, the erotic was rarely something that was conceived of in simplistic or straightforward terms by the Symbolists. As a result, their transformations of the Greek body as sexual other – whether as animal, monster or oriental – complicated its reception in new and unprecedented ways. If anything this is testimony to the sheer fascination of the Symbolists with sexuality itself.

## Notes

- 1 Arnold Böcklin, *Battle of the Centaurs*, 1873. Tempera on canvas. 107 × 198 cm (Kunstmuseum, Basel).
- 2 Epstein, Orsitto and Righi (2017: 171) find a commentary in this work on the madness of the Franco-Prussian war.
- 3 Odilon Redon, *Struggle between a Woman and a Centaur*, 1905. Pastel (private collection).
- 4 Earlier studies show that Redon had been meditating on the theme of the centaur and the sexes before he realized this painting: Odilon Redon, *Centaur and Centauress*, c. 1885–90. Charcoal on buff paper. 36.2 × 33.7 cm (private collection).
- 5 Franz von Stuck, *The Fantastic Hunt*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 74 × 184 cm (Museum Villa Stuck, Munich).
- 6 Franz von Stuck, *The Lusty Ride*, 1900. Oil on wood. 55 × 78 cm (private collection).

- 7 Max Klinger, *Pursued Centaur*, 1881. Etching and aquatint with chine collé, 20.4 × 41.2 cm (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).
- 8 Klinger dedicated the series to the engraver and art dealer Hermann Sagert, and the German composer Schumann.
- 9 The metopes of the Parthenon, depicting the mythological battle of the centaurs and the Lapiths, being the most famous example.
- 10 The classical sources for Chiron include: Homer, *Iliad* 4.218, 11.830–2; and Ovid, *Fasti* 5.
- 11 Gustave Moreau, *The Education of Achilles* (or *The Centaur*), 1884. Oil on canvas. 33 × 24.5 cm (private collection).
- 12 Chiron's home in Greek myth, Mount Pelion was also the scene of the marriage of Achilles' parents Peleus and Thetis. The uninvited goddess Eris produced the golden apple which would trigger the judgement of Paris and the Trojan War.
- 13 The nobility of Preisler's man and horse compositions seem to echo this same tradition.
- 14 Europa's myth is recorded principally by Herodotus (*Histories* 1.2) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses*), but is also mentioned by several other classical sources.
- 15 Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter and Europa*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 175 × 130 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 16 Gustave Moreau, *Europa and the Bull*, c. 1869. Watercolour on paper (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 17 Gustave Moreau, *The Rape of Europa*, 1869. Oil on wood, 26 × 42 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 18 Cited by Laran and Deshairs (1913: 47): 'une statue pale, sans vie, moins grecque que romaine'.
- 19 Valentin Serov, *The Rape of Europa*, 1910. Oil on canvas. 98 × 71 cm (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).
- 20 We might compare the many examples of such *koure* in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. See further Stieber (2012).
- 21 Leda's offspring included the demi-god twins Castor and Pollux (the 'Dioscuri'), Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra, the wife of the Homeric king Agamemnon.
- 22 Gustave Moreau, *Leda*, date unknown. Oil on canvas. 220 × 205 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 23 Klimt's 1917 painting of Leda was destroyed during the Second World War.
- 24 Jan Preisler, *Leda and the Swan*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 76.5 × 96 cm (location unknown).
- 25 A different Galatea from that of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth discussed in Chapter 3, though the two were often confused in later artistic tradition.



- 26 Gustave Moreau, *Galatea*, c. 1880. Oil on wood, 85.5 × 66 cm (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).
- 27 Gustave Moreau, *Galatea*, 1896. Gouache on wove paper, 39.5 × 25.7 cm (Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA).
- 28 Odilon Redon, *The Cyclops*, 1898. Oil on canvas. 63.5 × 51 cm (Kröller-Möller Rijksmuseum, Otterloo).
- 29 Gustave Moreau, *Pasiphaë*, 1880–90. Oil on canvas, 195 × 147 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 30 See for example: Gustave Moreau, *Pasiphaë*, 1860. Watercolour, 24 × 18 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris); Gustave Moreau, *Pasiphaë*, 1876–80. Watercolour with gouache, 26 × 51 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris).
- 31 Gustave Moreau, *The Chimera*, 1867. Oil on panel. 33.02 × 27.31 cm (Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA).
- 32 Alexandre Séon, *The Chimaera's Despair*, c. 1892 (private collection).
- 33 For the cultural background to the concept of the 'oriental' and 'orientalism', see Said (1978).
- 34 Gustave Moreau, *The Toilet*, c. 1885–90. Gouache and watercolour. 193 × 330 cm (Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo).
- 35 Moreau's and others' oriental women draw heavily on Chassériau's many harem bathing scenes.
- 36 Gaston Bussière, *Helen of Troy*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm (Musée municipal des Ursulines, Mâcon).
- 37 Gustave Moreau, *The Glorification of Helen*, 1897. Watercolour. 230 × 120 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris). Several preparatory versions of this theme exist from 1879/80, a majority of which similarly experiment with orientalizing imagery in Helen's depiction. Compare also: Gustave Moreau, *Goddess on the Rock*, c. 1890. Watercolour with gouache. 30.2 × 19.7 cm (Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama).
- 38 'Hier erscheint H. als eine andere Maria, die die Materie überwindet.'
- 39 Arnold Böcklin, *The Death of Cleopatra*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 77.2 × 62 cm (Kunstmuseum, Basel).
- 40 Gustave Moreau, *Cleopatra*, 1887. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 40 × 25 cm (Louvre, Paris).
- 41 Böcklin portrayed Cleopatra again in a later painting of 1878.
- 42 Flaubert ([1862] 1977: 277).
- 43 Carl Strathmann, *Salammbô*, 1894–95. Mixed media on canvas, 187.5 × 287 cm (Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar, Weimar).
- 44 František Kobilha, *Salambo*, 1913. Lithograph, paper, 65 × 47 cm (from the cycle *Women of my Dreams*).
- 45 Gaston Bussière, *Salammbô*, 1920. Oil on canvas (Musée des Ursulines, Mâcon).



## Conclusion

It would be hard to point to a single artwork that summarizes the sheer diversity of the Greek body's reception in Symbolist art. But if we had to, one candidate would certainly be Mikhail Vrubel's *Muse*<sup>1</sup> (c. 1890) (Figure 33). In itself a fine recapitulation of the artist's work, it may also be taken more broadly as representative of Symbolism as a whole. The painting, which – as other of Vrubel's works we have examined in this book – is actually a design for a theatre curtain, simply shows the classical Muse as a beautiful young woman. Half-nude, she leans on her arm as she looks distractedly into the distance. There is undoubtedly something erotic about this Muse, but there is also a hint of melancholy as well as, perhaps, foreboding. And there is mystery too. She leaves us somehow in the dark, partaking of some higher inspiration or knowledge to which we are not, and cannot be, party. One foot in this world and one in the next. Is she angel or demon? We cannot tell. But we doubt neither the power nor the inspiration of this Symbolist Muse.

In this book we have witnessed something of the diversity of the Greek body's erotic reception in Symbolist art. In conclusion we consider a few brief reflections emerging from the foregoing chapters, and the various Symbolist transformations of the Greek body we have encountered. It is worth first exploring the qualities of that reception. How did the Symbolists access the classics? As we have seen, their relationship to the ancient was not a linear one. It was a combination of direct and indirect interpretations of classical literature, myth and art: indirect inasmuch as many Symbolists were drawing on an intermediary reception tradition in art that stretched back to the early Renaissance. That is not to say that their transformations of the classics were not consistently original in nature. But some Symbolists did draw heavily on such earlier tradition, whether or not they consciously considered themselves part of it. In Moreau's case we have seen the strong inspiration of Mantegna



**Figure 33** Mikhail Vrubel, *Muse*. Courtesy Getty – Heritage Images/Contributor.

and others in his reinventions of classical myth. The same can be said of Redon and Delacroix. This also applies to Symbolist artists' understandings of classical literature. If Homer or Ovid were more often than not the original source for the mythological narratives they portrayed, the Symbolists were by no means the first to represent them in art. And often such artistic receptions in Symbolism were refracted in turn through earlier literary reinterpretations of ancient texts – whether the most immediate influence of the Symbolist poets, Naturalists such as Flaubert, or poetry before the *fin-de-siècle*. Opera and the stage were likewise important intermediaries. And in the case of classical art, we cannot overlook the fact that for the vast majority of Symbolists their initial contact had come in the form of their training in the Academic schools.

But many Symbolists also had a direct relationship with the classics, whether or not that was coloured by later art and literature. That could be by virtue of the philological background of their education. We have seen in the case of Redon and Rops that these artists had first-hand knowledge of classical texts.

This dynamic was still more prominent for classical art. Given that the Academic ateliers had most often furnished them with their initial contact with the Greek body in its sculptural form, the habits acquired during their training acted as a spur for many Symbolists to work more directly from ancient models. This is clearly attested in Klinger's writings on art, while his sculptural work above all demonstrates the fruit of such a relationship with Greek sculpture and vase painting. Though that relationship is arguably less obvious for some other Symbolists – allowing for the fact that we do not have the benefit of extant theoretical treatises – a majority nonetheless share in some degree this first-hand engagement with ancient art. In the case of some artists, their initial Academic training also spurred them to travel in the Mediterranean, pursuing variants of the Grand Tour. From Böcklin onwards these journeys had a profound impact on Symbolists' frame of reference for reinterpreting the Greek body, and the meanings they attributed to it.

Despite this profound engagement with classical art, such depth is tempered by a certain narrowness of interest. For their obsession with the erotic, coupled with the strong influence of Academic artistic tradition, propelled the majority of Symbolists towards a handful of ancient models of the Greek body. For some these became in a sense palladia of eternal beauty. No single ancient sculptor was so important here as Praxiteles. His *Aphrodite of Knidos* continued to inspire the Symbolists in new ways, as it had generations of earlier artists. We have seen how Böcklin imagined her emerging from the ruins of an overgrown ancient garden, her vital and eternal sexuality still very much alive. She might be paired with the *Venus of Milo*, who with her formed the backdrop to the Symbolist erotic imagination. To a lesser degree, the monumental sculptures of Phidias, and the strange godhead that seemed to reside within them, also exercised an enduring fascination. But equally, evident above all in the paintings of Moreau, Praxiteles' male nudes haunted the Symbolist imagination. The timeless beauty of the Greek sculptor's *ephebes*, which seemed to the Symbolists to have the ethereal qualities of another world, itself became a symbol in Moreau's art. But the descendants of the adolescent nudes of Praxiteles and other ancient sculptors also had an outing in the work of Redon and Klinger. The examples we have considered in the previous chapters show that artists' understanding of these sculptures could be at once direct and indirect. We might imagine the artist in his studio studying first-hand from

classical models, while surrounded by the earlier interpretations of admired artists. Beyond the idiosyncrasy of their preoccupations, this combination of the direct and indirect inspiration of ancient sculpture helps to explain the creativity with which the Symbolists reinvented the Greek body.

While artists found their primary inspiration in the Greek body itself – returning to classical art for its creative reinvention – it was nonetheless Greek myth which often supplied the context. What predilections did the Symbolists have in turning to Greek myth? To some degree they reflect the interests of their Neoclassical predecessors in amatory (often Ovidian) narratives. But if one prominent pattern emerges across the chapters of this book, it is that of their pronounced interest in myths permitting them to explore the psyche in more depth. This is a broader quality of Symbolist classical receptions, but this study's choice of subject reflects the overriding emphasis on the erotic which characterizes that exploration. Within that frame, certain myths are of recurrent interest. It is no accident that Moreau's earliest celebrated work is on the theme of Oedipus, given his myth's strong potential for exploring the psychological characteristics of the erotic. There is also a consistent interest in aetiological myths of origin, above all of the birth of love, and in those which express the tyrannical power of erotic love, whether that of Actaeon, Psyche, Europa, Ganymede or the judgement of Paris. Tragic myths also enjoy a very varied incarnation in Symbolism, whether expressed through male figures such as Icarus or Orpheus, or female ones such as Medusa. Such tragic interest extended to classical legend too, whether actual historical figures such as Cleopatra or fictional ones such as Salammbo.

The female Greek body plays a prominent role in Symbolism primarily as an object of beauty. The same goddesses that had traditionally featured in allegories of female beauty – the goddess of love Aphrodite, the goddess of the hunt Artemis and the moon goddess Selene – continue to play a similar role in Symbolism. But the way that female beauty is articulated changes greatly over the course of the artistic movement's development. That change can be traced in Moreau's career, the beauty of whose women becomes ever more rarefied as time goes on, and one could argue realizes its logical abstraction in the art of Redon. Indeed the beauty of Redon's goddesses is so divine that it cannot be directly depicted and may – as in his *The Birth of Venus* – only be outlined. The artist suggests the divinity of the goddess' beauty, but the true splendour of its

form is left to our imagination. While the classical beauty of the Symbolists' goddesses and heroines takes its cue from Academic precursors, it acquires a new quality that is not to be found in Academicism. This might be described as its intensity. There is after all something consistently unnerving about the Symbolists' women, be that their tragic, obsessive or domineering nature (as in Moreau and Klinger), their detachment from this world or partaking in another (as in Khnopff), or their sheer sexual abandon (as in Rops).

Growing out of such a conception of female beauty, woman was also a signifier of danger in Symbolist art. For the Symbolists, the Medusa myth captured the essential qualities of the threat that they considered native to female beauty. And other analogous mythological narratives, such as that of the siren, were employed to express the same allegory. For a majority of artists, and most prominently in the work of Khnopff, Stuck, Klinger and Malczewski, woman becomes a symbol of dangerous and uncontrollable erotic power. But it would be a mistake to assume that this characterization of woman's sexuality as menace was primarily motivated by moral considerations. These were rarely a factor for Symbolist artists, and where they do feature they tend to be strictly subordinate to aesthetic motivations. Rather, in several cases, the ineluctable power of the erotic is something that is celebrated for its own sake. There is no artist in whose work this dynamic is so defining as Rops, whose satirical and erotic classical allegories are unique in their juxtaposition of the mythological and the contemporary. In all of the works of the artists mentioned, the eroticized female body becomes something more than the simple sum of its parts. We have seen how the female Greek body itself came to symbolize a world within, or a world beyond. For some artists it thus became an object not only of beauty, but also of infinite mystery – an enigma that could not be solved, a wonder of incomprehension. Klinger's sculpture gave physical articulation to this ideal.

The male Greek body also played a role as erotic idol. In a not dissimilar fashion to that of the female body, it too was glorified as an object of beauty. This idolization of the male is less prominent in Symbolism, but is nonetheless to be found and has its own characteristics. Artists' initial conception of male beauty grew directly out of that of Neoclassicism, of which it can be considered a logical extension. This was a plastic beauty based very closely upon the forms of late classical Greek sculpture. But the Symbolists very quickly exceeded

such parameters. One way in which they did so was by freeing the eroticism of the male body from the shackles of Academicism. While they idolized the handsome Endymion, so too did they idolize the faun/satyr. And in this we detect a certain strain within Symbolism idealizing sexual freedom. We see this first in Böcklin's painting, but it receives its fullest articulation in the drawings of Rops and the paintings of Malczewski. In the faun/satyr Rops discovered a vehicle for the unrestrained expression of the erotic, while Malczewski used it in his highly individual (and at times bizarre) classical allegories. Another way in which the Symbolists went beyond the boundaries of the Neoclassical conception of the male body was in lending it sexual ambiguity. Homoerotic qualities can be argued to be present in Moreau's painting, and we have encountered the androgynous male in the work of other artists too. Most often the androgyne connotes the poet, tragically reduced by the vagaries of the world, but forever retaining a certain purity and innocence. Of all the Symbolists' incarnations of the Greek body, he is the one most often made emblem of their own art. That emblem is expressed most clearly and poignantly in Moreau's *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*.

Finally, we saw in summary how the Symbolists also transformed the Greek body as sexual other. This could be through approximation to animals, in the form of the half-man half-beast centaur, or other Greek myths involving more direct zoomorphic transformations; through the mythological monster, combining the qualities of various frightful beasts; or simply as the oriental, existing outside any tangible reality and divorced from the everyday, where the exotic but unattainable woman was above all a figure of enduring fascination. The Symbolists used all three as a vehicle to explore other dimensions of human sexuality, and its deeper recesses. If anything the Symbolists' imaginings of the sexual other are testimony to the utter inventiveness with which they transformed the Greek body. In their doing so, we might accord them the accolade of being in a sense the true heirs of the Greek mythologists. For if we can generalize one characteristic of the ways in which they recreated the narratives of Greek myth, it is its sheer creativity. As we saw in the example of Mallarmé's faun, this is something mirrored in Symbolist literature, reflecting a broader literary and artistic trend of reinterpreting the classics that characterizes the *fin-de-siècle*.<sup>2</sup> That is in turn part of a wider contemporary search for the very human origins of Greek myth. Yet it was the Symbolists



whose reinventions of that tradition were the most uncompromising, most daring and most original during the period.

Though its transformation was long in the gestation, in the space of a few short years at the end of the nineteenth century the Greek body was rapidly reinvented in new and unprecedented ways by the Symbolists. It was they above all others at this time who sought to rekindle those embers they believed to be still aflame in ancient sculpture, and they who hoped – as Pygmalion – to find the heart they knew once beat beneath the cold marble. And in that quest to make the Greek body human again, nothing was so important to them as the erotic. Returning to Vrubel's *Muse* and her distracted gaze, we are put in mind of Moreau's words:

I believe neither what I touch nor what I see. I only believe what I do not see and what I feel.<sup>3</sup>

For the Symbolists, that the Greek body might seem dead by no means meant that it was. Though the life within it might not be seen by modern eyes, it might still be felt. And the key to connecting with that life again was the erotic.

Ultimately their desire to transcend the materiality around them and the banality of the world which they inhabited was no more than a fantasy. The tragedy of the First World War and its aftermath would finally put paid to their belated attempts to return European art to those classical Arcadias it formerly inhabited.<sup>4</sup> But for a brief period in the hands of the Symbolists, the Greek body enjoyed a revival that saw it eroticized in ways it never had been before nor would be again.

## Notes

- 1 Mikhail Vrubel, *Muse*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas (State A. Radishev Art Museum, Saratov).
- 2 See my analysis of classical transformations in *Art Nouveau* (Warren 2017).
- 3 'Je ne crois ni à ce que je touche ni à ce que je vois . . . Je ne crois qu'à ce que je ne vois pas et à ce que je sens.' Cited in Laran and Deshairs (1913: 12).
- 4 The classics would, however, enjoy a brief, very different, afterlife in Modernism.



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